

Meeting the Madwomen: Mental Illness in Women in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World*, and Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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This study seeks to examine the character of the madwoman in Caribbean literature in three novels: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Oscar Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World*, and Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. Four characters, *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Antoinette Mason, *Our House in the Last World*'s Mercedes Santinio, and *Dreaming in Cuban*'s Celia and Felicia Del Pino, all experience madness at some point in their lives, and each character dies at the end of her respective novel. What I seek to demonstrate is that their madness does not originate from one specific point, but comes from a variety of outer and inner influences. Each woman experiences abuse in her life, either by her mother, her husband, her husband's family, or some combination of the three.

On a larger theoretical scale, though, these women go mad because they are subject to interlocking systems of patriarchy and colonialism which undermine their ability to form an identity outside of the approval they are able to gain from the male figures of authority in their lives. In some cases, this male figure is her father, but upon his death, she transfers her sense of identity to her husband, which does not end well since her husband's abuse keeps him from being a stable or successful builder of identity. Additionally, each of these women has an identity connection with her natural surroundings, whether it is a garden, a house, or the sea, and exile

from their safe places removes them from a location of stability on which they further based their sense of self, leaving them exiled from vibrant locations that celebrate their passion and femininity.

Each of these women experiences a singular event which exacerbates her circumstances to the point that it begins the mental spiral into madness and destructive behavior that results from it. I consider each woman's death and whether it is a triumph over madness or a defeat by madness. Finally, I consider how each character contributes to Caribbean feminist literary theory, either by creating a sense of outrage and inspiring action or by creating a sense of hope that a sense of self and peace can be attained despite the madness that often results from the abuses of the patriarchal system.

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By

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Dedicated to my husband, Joey Weaver, who supported me through the psychological hurdles of life in general, but specifically of this program, to my parents, Keith and Vicki Boyter, who encouraged me throughout my entire life to pursue great achievement in education and who made that education possible, and finally, to my precious Shelli, who provided many, many hours of comfort by the simple act of curling up in my lap while I wrote, and wrote, and wrote.

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MEETING THE MADWOMEN: MENTAL ILLNESS IN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*,
HIJUELOS'S *OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD*, AND GARCIA'S *DREAMING IN CUBAN*

INTRODUCTION: GILBERT AND GUBAR'S MADWOMAN MOVES TO THE
CARIBBEAN

I have always been intrigued by mental illness; I come from a lineage of madwomen, and I suffer from both anxiety and depression. As a result, I have always been drawn to literature that features women with similar issues. I am also keenly aware of the stigma that comes with mental/emotional illness and, since I coped with my problems without medical help for seventeen years, I am also interested in learning about others' coping mechanisms. Upon reading both *Our House in the Last World* and *Dreaming in Cuban*, I was struck by the coping mechanisms the three madwomen from these works used. Mercedes uses nostalgia and Celia and Felicia use the Sea and *Santería*, respectively. Upon reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I came to see a completely different treatment of madness; rather than using something else to cope with her madness, Antoinette uses her madness to cope with her untenable life circumstances. As all four characters I consider in this thesis are from the Caribbean, I concluded that there must be some common thread among their mental breakdowns. What comparing these women has shown me is that their madness is the result of a complex set of circumstances that place them in positions of oppression, by the vestiges of colonialism, cultures that are patriarchal, and removal from their natural, native environment. In light of these women's respective situations, I must then consider how their stories fit into larger feminist literary theory. Does their madness hinder their triumph over the oppressive nature of male-dominated culture, or does it cause them to succumb to it?

And, in succumbing it, are they successful in inspiring rebellion by other women against their subordinate position in their own society?

What is a “Madwoman?” In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar examine her origin in the female writer’s struggle for a place within the literary canon, for the right to write about her own gender. Their first question, “is the pen a metaphorical penis?,” is the essential issue around which their examination is based. They focus on white, British women authors in nineteenth-century England, examining their characters and stories and how these reflect their conflicts as female authors in a patriarchal society which seeks to keep them in their proper role as uneducated subordinates. They describe the very act of writing as “isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (51). To wield the pen (the penis) was to attempt to take on a male role for which they were neither equipped nor capable. The woman writer was in an especially unfortunate position; she was dismissed entirely or her femininity called into question. Her writing was criticized, as she lacked “the pen/penis which would enable [her] . . . to refute one fiction by another” (12), to tell her own story rather than to be reduced to “a creation ‘penned’ by man” (13). Were she able to break into the male-dominated field of literature, she would have to be prepared to endure ridicule and questions about her femininity.

According to Gilbert and Gubar, the Madwoman is not just a part of female authors; she is a part of all women. But what, exactly, is a Madwoman? The online *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “madwoman” as “a woman who is insane. More generally (also hyperbolically): a woman who behaves like a lunatic, a wildly foolish woman.” Gilbert and Gubar discuss the concept of the madwoman in viewing woman’s experience in a patriarchal

society, in women authors' experience of isolation and ridicule at attempting to break into a male-dominated profession, and in the characters' experience in these women's writings. They present nineteenth-century Anglo women as being born into an environment that can easily sow the seeds of madness. Of her upbringing, they say that "any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, self-lessness as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health, since the human animal's first and strongest urge is to his/her own survival, please, assertion" (54). In a male-dominated environment in which women are trained from childhood to consider themselves as inferior, less intelligent, and less important, madness would seem to be a common response. They also note that "hysteria did occur mainly among women in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and because throughout the nineteenth century this mental illness, like many other nervous disorders, was thought to be caused by the female reproductive system, as if to elaborate upon Aristotle's notion that femaleness was in and of itself a deformity" (53). Women were damned by their own bodies; their (understandable) reaction to being ignored and oppressed because of their gender was, in turn, blamed on their own reproductive systems and furthered the view of women as unstable, dangerous, and inherently of less worth. Gilbert and Gubar present a picture of the inhospitable environment that confronted female authors and their female characters in nineteenth-century England.

While Gilbert and Gubar were writing about white women authors, through their selection of *Jane Eyre*'s Creole Madwoman, Bertha Mason, as the figure upon which they name their work and subsequent chapter discussing her in detail, the reach of their theory extends beyond England's borders and into the islands of the Caribbean itself. In terms of domination and oppression, the Caribbean is figured as the female to Europe's conquering male. Patricia

Mohammed describes the region as “virgin territory to be used, developed, exploited and governed by the trespassers” (7). Mohammed presents us with the idea of a childlike, innocent, feminine landscape raped by strangers (colonialist powers). The words she chooses for the actions of the “trespassers,” “used, developed, exploited, and governed,” are commonly associated both with colonialism and patriarchy. Elsewhere, she describes the Caribbean as “not just one lost child, but the children of many parents” (11). She offers us a picture of a region that is both childlike and feminine, but also “lost” or without a clear sense of identity.

Gilbert and Gubar’s Madwoman can also be brought to the Caribbean because she suffers at the hand of those same forces that turned eighteenth and nineteenth century women into madwomen in Europe. Colonizers from England, France, and Spain converged on the Caribbean islands, occupying them, enslaving their indigenous people, “importing” slaves from Africa, India, and Asia and using them to develop and exploit the land, as Mohammed points out. The Caribbean Madwoman finds herself in an even worse position than her British counterpart: she is doubly oppressed, first, by the Western colonizing forces that put her in a place of subjugation as she is not a part of them and second, by her position as a woman in a male-dominated society.

Some feminist literary critics see the madwoman as a figure of rebellion against a patriarchal system of oppression. According to Elizabeth J. Donaldson, “the figure of the madwoman as feminist rebel has had a sustained cultural currency” (99). The madwoman, then, becomes the paragon of oppressed women across the world; her descent into madness serves primarily to send a message to male-dominated societies that she will not be “tamed” and will not live under the weight of its suffocative force. “Madness-as-protest” as a theory can be seen as limiting madness by making it appear spiteful and ineffective, though; to achieve her end result and to make her message known, the madwoman must destroy herself, which benefits neither her

nor the female collective. Along those lines, Donaldson also notes that “this metaphor indirectly diminishes the lived experience of many people disabled by mental illness” (102). Interpreting madness as a form of rebellion seems to imply that madness is a choice, which can trivialize the experience of those who genuinely suffer from mental and emotional illnesses. However, to interpret madness as an innate quality of women is no better than the nineteenth century male outlook that madness stems from the female reproductive system and that the woman cannot help but “go mad.” Literary madwomen such as Antoinette Mason, Mercedes Santinio, and Celia and Felicia Del Pino struggle with a myriad of forces, both internal and external, that result in an ultimate need to escape their circumstances, and madness becomes that primary method of escape.

Madness-as-protest and madness-as-escape actually look quite similar. Each type of madness, according to Shoshana Felman, is “a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration” (2). Madness (not mental illness) is a phenomenon suffered by those who are voiceless in society, both culturally and politically, by those who are the “Other” or who have been made into the “Other.” Her description of madness as “a manifestation” of negative circumstances demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship; I am “mad” because I am “oppressed,” which may sound like madness is a form of rebellion, but to call it such would suggest that “becoming mad” is a strategy to somehow combat one’s situation. Donaldson notes that “madness itself offers women little possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion” (101). Her idea makes sense; how would one be able to bring about a true rebellion if she were considered to be insane? To “become mad” is to isolate oneself, to draw into oneself and thereby to render oneself ineffective at influencing people or changing society. How would a madwoman maintain enough credibility to start a movement to overthrow patriarchal oppression? Rather,

her madness would have to inspire a spirit of rebellion in the reader so that, through her madness, she serves as inspiration for real-life action.

I view this kind of madness instead as a coping mechanism, as a way for the madwoman to distance herself mentally from her powerlessness in the face of patriarchal systems. Donaldson says, “in the face of such repression, ‘going mad’ might be considered the only sane response to an insane world” (100). In essence, she is saying that for the madwoman, insanity is the only sane way to cope with her position in her world. The madwoman understands her position as powerless against male domination, and rather than attempt to rebel (madness-as-protest), simply seeks to survive and cope the best way she can: to dissociate from reality (madness-as-escape).

For the Caribbean woman character, however, patriarchal oppression becomes complicated by another issue: if she is not part of the colonizing group, then she suffers from an additional level of subordination, and that can vary depending on her particular ethnic background. While it would seem that whiteness would allow a woman a certain level of safety or privilege, for Creole women, for example, their “customs and habits were viewed as departures from a norm established by the European colonizer and perceived as deficient in both form and content” (Mohammed 19). Clearly, skin color is not the deciding force regarding privilege in these particular colonized cultures; there are too many additional variables at play that both isolates the Caribbean woman and causes an identity crisis for her. It is in the intersections of both a cultural identity crisis and an oppressive male relationship that we find the women I address in this study.

Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Oscar Hijuelos’s *Our House in the Last World*, and Christina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* share this common thread: all three are Caribbean novels that feature madwomen. Rhys’s Antoinette Mason, Hijuelos’s Mercedes Santinio, and Garcia’s

Celia and Felicia Del Pino go through periods of “madness” that are brought about directly at the hands of the men in their lives. However, these authors demonstrate that “madness” is not as simple as it seems; even the quintessential “madwoman,” Antoinette, did not begin her life that way. These authors present the concept of madness as a complex phenomena, the product of isolation created by an abusive patriarchal culture, colonialism, immigration, and abandonment. Through their journeys into and through madness, the authors examine the circumstances that put women in a place of conflict (isolation, lack of education, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse); this study will seek to examine the situations encountered by the “madwomen” and determine how they set the stage for each character’s mental breakdown.

Rhys, Hijuelos, and Garcia use powerful color and nature imagery in these works which connects the women both with their environment and with their own madness. Such imagery hearkens to ecofeminist theory and back to Mohammed’s earlier description of the Caribbean in female terms and the colonizers as “trespassers.” As Ben Heller further puts it in his article, “Landscape, Femininity, and Caribbean Discourse,” “a signal characteristic of Caribbean discourse has been the tendency to figure the shaping environment as female, or with qualities such as fluidity and relationality that have been associated with women, femininity, and the female body in both patriarchal and feminist discourses—and both positive and negative effects have been ascribed to this feminized landscape” (392). The Caribbean land/seascape has been described in feminine terms, and Caribbean women are often associated with the natural environment. These authors specifically make a connection between the homeland and life and between isolation/removal from the land and death. For these women, to be isolated and extracted from their family and their home is to perish. This study will treat the nature imagery in all three works and how each character develops a sense of identity through her natural

connection to her homeland. Finally, the authors demonstrate the actions of these women from within their mental illness and how their actions bring about resolution and peace or ultimate destruction.

Chapter One discusses Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her answer to *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason/Antoinette Cosway's history leading up to her madness and death in *Eyre*'s Thornfield home. I examine the factors that led to her mental break: her mother's emotional unavailability, her lack of cultural identity, and Rochester's abuse and exiling her to England, removing her from Dominica's natural beauty which gave her solace. I will compare Rhys's Eden imagery to that of poet John Milton to display the difference between a Caribbean view of paradise and a British view of the same. I will then examine her madness and suicide itself and how it may or may not have brought her peace in the end.

Chapter Two examines Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World* and the circumstances that surround the downfall of the Santinio family and Mercedes Santinio's mental break. I will examine how her physical removal from Cuba and from her family and placement in New York creates an extreme identity crisis, and how her evil sister-in-law's abuse and her husband's failure to defend and protect her destroy her sense of self-worth and turn her into a paranoid shell of a woman, and finally how her husband Alejo's death and her lack of a male protective figure in her life (even an abusive one) causes her to break from reality and brings about her death.

Chapter Three looks at two women who remain in Cuba, Christina Garcia's Celia and Felicia Del Pino from *Dreaming in Cuban*. Each woman suffers circumstances at the hands of men in their lives that lead them to mental breaks, and each woman learns to navigate their situations and finds healing in their natural surroundings.

I conclude by comparing these women in terms of the causes of their madness and how their madness was manifested during their lives. I will also discuss whether or not their deaths were due to their madness at all. I will discuss whether or not each character achieved peace in death and whether in death, her madness is healed or destroys her. In a larger context, I will also discuss each novel regarding its position in feminist literary theory and how it serves to further the feminist cause. It is my submission that Rhys and Hijuelos use a similar method: weak female characters who are destroyed by their madness to inspire the reader to action, where Garcia chooses to use strong women who find peace in and through their madness to inspire readers to seek such strength.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM EDEN TO THE ATTIC: *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*'S ANTOINETTE MASON

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) was intended by Jean Rhys to be the untold story of Gilbert and Gubar's quintessential madwoman, *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason. Rhys granted the character what Charlotte Brontë denied her: a name, a history, and most importantly, a story which explains her mental breakdown, thereby turning her into a three dimensional character who becomes understandable and sympathetic. Teresa Winterhalter applauds Rhys for "[returning] dignity to a previously overshadowed character" (216). No longer Brontë's wild-haired, voiceless, and violent crazy Creole woman, Rhys's Antoinette Cosway becomes a character with a complex mixture of English and Caribbean influences, torn between two worlds yet accepted by neither.

Brontë's Bertha Mason is not a major character in *Jane Eyre* even though she is a major plot point. The novel itself follows the life of Jane Eyre, an orphan who manages to find a job as a governess in Thornfield, Edward Rochester's home (and place of the attic that serves as Bertha's prison). The remainder of the novel is their love story, how they separate and come back together with Rochester finally being able to see Jane as an equal in his relationship. Jane's discovery of Bertha (to whom Rochester is still married) drives her away from Rochester initially, but when Bertha burns down Thornfield, critically injuring Rochester and leaping to her death, Jane finds sympathy for him and grows to love him again.

Rhys answers *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha mason with *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Antoinette Cosway, daughter of Annette and Mr. Cosway, belonging to a family which was once prestigious as plantation owners but has now found itself reduced to a social level below even that of the

former slaves on the island. Rhys's story is Antoinette's coming-of-age and is the story of the failure of her relationship with Rochester, which eventually leads to her madness and imprisonment in Thornfield. Both novels follow the women from childhood, through difficult family situations that eventually leave them without family to support them; in that way, Antoinette and Jane are quite similar, but their ends are vastly different, even though both are directly connected to Edward Rochester. Rather than being a love story like *Jane Eyre's*, Antoinette's story is a tragedy.

Antoinette may not be doomed mentally from the start, but her social position as part of the dying caste of former plantation owners certainly puts her at an emotional disadvantage. Her social group finds itself clinging to the shreds of a former life of privilege, but with the end of slavery comes the end of cheap labor, and thus the end of wealth for the former plantation class. In what is an understandable emotional response to newfound freedom after years of slavery, the Black citizens of Dominica begin to look down upon their former masters as their financial resources wither away. For the White children, this dynamic creates an atmosphere of confusion; they know that they should be privileged because of their whiteness (a concept that their parents certainly made clear), but their actual experience tells them otherwise. Mistreatment and ridicule from the Black members of the island at the same time their parents are telling them that they are the privileged ones creates cognitive dissonance, an inability to reconcile their hypothetical position of authority with their actual experience of shame and isolation. It is in this situation that we first encounter Antoinette, and she attempts to deal with her situation by aligning herself mentally with the Black people in her life rather than her mother and other White people. She seems to see herself as Black at heart, and as such, she prays for her physical appearance to match her own heart. She says that her family is hated by the Black ex-slaves because her step-

father, Mr. Mason, is wealthy and she and her mother are no longer part of the “White cockroach” class. However, neither can she be considered an English person, and she does not seem to want to align herself with them anyway as she is unfamiliar with their culture and customs. She mentions after visiting with the rich White people, “I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine’s cooking” (Rhys 35). Food is one of the central aspects of culture, and by rejecting English cooking for Creole cooking, she shows the inner conflict she experiences. Her skin does not match her tastes. Her mind does not match her body. And thus, the seed for mental breakdown is sown.

Antoinette’s mother exacerbates the situation; Annette’s cold, unfeeling treatment of her daughter leaves Antoinette feeling like not only an imposter in her own skin, but also an alien in her own family. Her mother is selfish and detached, worrying primarily about Antoinette’s mentally-disabled brother Pierre than about Antoinette. When Antoinette wakes up terrified from a nightmare, her mother chastises her for making noise and waking her brother, rather than comforting her or asking about the content of the dream. This action is far more significant than it appears at first glance. It is bad enough that she chastises Antoinette for something that she cannot control (the dream), but she also refuses to ask about the content of the dream and ignores it altogether. Antoinette, quite literally, finds her dream to be crushed by her mother; if her mother treats her nightmares this way, how then would she treat a good dream? How would she treat any dreams or ambitions that Antoinette has for her life? Antoinette not only sees that her mother cares only for herself and for Pierre, but she also sees that Annette has no time for Antoinette’s dreams. The result, then, seems to be a suppression of dreams entirely. She floats through much of her childhood listless and detached.

Annette's detachment and selfishness toward her daughter leaves Antoinette to depend on the only other mother figure in her life, Christophine, a "Christmas gift" to Annette from her first husband, Antoinette's father. In her article "The Obscure Maternal Double: The Mother/Daughter Relationship Represented In and Out of Matrophobia," which deals specifically with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, María Reventós suggests that "adolescent daughters often achieve identification with their same gender by idealizing not their own mother but another woman" (288). Christophine becomes Antoinette's caretaker, confidante, and advocate, something that further chips away at her sense of identity; Antoinette, who wishes to be Black, is rejected by her white mother and is cared for by her mother's Black servant. She receives most of her mothering from Christophine, and because of this she associates more with island culture than English culture. However, her skin does not match her heart and cannot allow for her to be physically claimed as daughter by Christophine. M. M. Adjarian describes her as "caught between and alienated from two 'mothers'" (203). She is connected to both women, one by birth and the other by affinity. Ultimately, however, she is forever separated from both her biological mother by the former's self-absorbedness and unsettling love for Pierre, and she is forever separated from Christophine by a social system that places them on different planes, one with preferred skin color but no sense of self, and the other as a remnant of slavery, but with a sense of identity, even if it is identity as "other."

It is interesting to note, however, that Annette has her own reasons for her lack of maternal instinct. María Reventós explains how Annette's own emptiness is a result of her own rejection as a white woman in Dominica; as Reventós observes, Rhys "subtly but persistently highlights the unbreakable link between maternal and socio-cultural rejection" (290), and also notes that "Antoinette's feeling of maternal deprivation is not riddled with blaming hostility" and

in fact, calls her “an object of pity, never the brunt of attack or criticism” (Reventós 290). When viewed in terms of her own cultural status as Other, Annette does merit sympathy for her own fragmented mental state that precludes her devoting the necessary attention to her daughter. In her case, “the social context that breeds maternal neglect is blamed rather than the individual neglectful mother blamed” (Reventós 290). The result is an identity crisis that is inherited, passed from Annette to Antoinette, demonstrating a proclivity to madness, but not necessarily a genetic inheritance of the same. What is passed down instead is a legacy as an exile without a strong identity.

The most obvious early cause of Antoinette’s madness is the highly traumatic burning of her home by freed slaves who become angry at her stepfather’s actions against them, despite Annette’s warning to him of how his decisions could affect them. After Annette and Mr. Mason have been married for a year or so, he brings in laborers from the East Indies rather than hiring the Black people from the island because he believes “the [Black] people here won’t work. They don’t want to work” (Rhys 35). Annette warns him more than once that his path of action will be destructive and dangerous because of how greatly it will anger the Black islanders. In this situation, Mr. Mason demonstrates to Antoinette the arrogance of the colonial mentality; he refuses to learn anything about the culture in which he is living, and as a result, makes a poor decision that has fatal consequences. In their anger, the Black islanders come together and set fire to Coulibri, burning Pierre and almost killing the rest of the family between the fire itself and the angry mob that greets them when they attempt to board a carriage to leave. Antoinette sees the only identity that she has known (that of the family of an ex-slave-owner navigating the racially tense environment of the Caribbean) disregarded and ignored by the arrogant Englishman with catastrophic results. Mentally, she rejects Englishness, seeing the arrogance of

the colonial attitude, but as a result of its influence on her life, she is rejected by the black culture with which she feels greater kinship.

Of course, the trauma from the burning of Coulibri has more drastic physical results that fragment Antoinette's mental state. Her brother is killed and her mother's beloved parrot dives off the burning home, caught up in flames and dies unmercifully. This experience drives her own mother mad, destroys her mother's marriage, and leaves Antoinette at both a crossroads and an impasse. She is at a point where her Englishness and Blackness are about to part ways; she must leave Dominica as her home has now been destroyed. She must choose to embrace one and reject the other, but regardless of her choice, she will be forced to live an Englishwoman's life at this point. Unfortunately for her, the decision is made for her when she attempts to stay on the island with her friend Tia. She reaches out to her childhood friend, and receives not a hand, but a rock to the forehead. The Creole in her soul is rejected by the people she wishes would embrace her and she loses connection with her identity both mentally and physically.

Her trauma continues as she is shuttled off to a convent since she has lost her mother (to madness) and her brother (to death). Pierre dies on the way to Spanish Town, and Annette is overcome by her anger and hatred toward Mr. Mason for refusing to listen to her and for refusing to let her rescue her parrot. When Antoinette wakes from her illness some weeks after the burning of Coulibri, her Aunt Cora tells her that Annette is away "in the country. Resting. Getting well again" (Rhys 46). Antoinette seems to know that this is not totally true as she vividly remembers her mother's screaming outbursts in the last few weeks; I believe she knows within that Annette will not get well. She is now orphaned, both physically and mentally, having her family taken away from her and having herself been taken away from her home, her comfort, and her surrogate mother (Christophine) and her "sister" (Tia), and she's been locked away into a

closed environment with people she does not know at all. The convent is an interesting setting for Antoinette, though. It is a safe place for her; she refers to it as “my refuge, a place of sunshine” (56). She does well in school and ingratiates herself to her teachers, so in that way, it is a refuge and a form of escape from the abuse of her mother and from her position as an outcast in her own culture. However, it also stands in stark contrast to the vibrancy and vitality of the island itself, in which Antoinette truly thrives and shines. Antoinette describes the convent in terms of brightness and darkness together; she says, “Everything was brightness or dark. The walls, the blazing colours of the flowers in the garden, the nuns’ habits were bright, but their veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the trees, were black. That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell” (57). Such imagery suggests that for her, the convent was a safe place since she describes its brightness, but also that it was a place of isolation, in that there are dark elements. Her deep connection to the island and to the lush nature therein leaves her ill-equipped for a lifetime in a closed off space full of brick walls and gates. What may be a refuge for a time for her cannot be a permanent solution as, without connection to her outside world, she will begin to wither and die. Even in this environment, though, Antoinette carries an emotional connection to the wild, vividly colored island; she recalls herself and her classmate “cross-stitching silk roses on a pale background. We can colour the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Underneath, I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (53). Note that the background is pale, but she picks deep colors that recall the sea, the verdant landscape of her garden in Coulibri, and the passionate purple flowers therein. Underneath, she writes—not just in red, but in “fire red”—her own name. This seems to indicate that her name is a source of power for her, that as long as she has that name--and notably, she makes sure to include her father’s

surname so that her complete identity is chronicled in those fiery words—she will maintain her own sense of self. The color red is commonly associated with passion and anger; in that way, her choice of color can be seen as rebellion against the male authority (her stepfather) that sent her to the convent. That she stitches her name in red also foreshadows her destruction; she writes her name in fire which, in addition to being reminiscent of the vitality of the natural surroundings of her home, also hints to her coming destruction via fire.

The closed-in environment of the convent create an Antoinette who is frightened and alone, orphaned and detached, locked away in a dark convent with her step brother as the person in her life who makes decisions about her money and her freedom. Her soul identifies with a black Creole culture that cannot or will not accept her, but her appearance aligns her with an English culture of which she cannot and does not want to be a part. To simply dismiss Antoinette as innately mad or as coming from a lineage of mentally ill people is to sell her short, to reduce her to a two-dimensional person, no more complex than Brontë's mute and violent Bertha, who acts without reason. Carine Mardorossian describes her as “desperately trying to patch together the fragments of her disintegrating world” (1075), which is precisely the case; she has had her world crumble around her time after time, losing herself in the mental rubble of her childhood.

Her ultimate break, however, comes directly at the hands of her English husband, Brontë's Edward Rochester, and from his inconsistent attitude toward her and his eventual cruel emotional abuse and imprisonment of her. It is Rochester who, upon hearing from Daniel that “there is madness in that family,” (Rhys 96) goes beyond merely suspecting that she is mentally ill and begins the process of making her so. Rhys creates an alleged half-brother for Antoinette to instigate and catalyze Rochester's realization that his new wife is not as she seems; Daniel Cosway presents Antoinette as a madwoman by nature, part of a lineage of mental illness and

doomed from the start to a life of insanity; he asks Rochester, “Ask that devil of a man Richard Mason three questions and make him answer you. Is your wife’s mother shut away, a raging lunatic and worse besides? Dead or alive I do not know. Was your wife’s brother an idiot from birth, though God mercifully take him early on? Is your wife herself going the same way as her mother and all knowing it?” (98). By taking Daniel’s words to heart without speaking to his wife, Rochester is, at the very least, committing willful blindness, failing to recognize any circumstances that may bear significance in the creation of Antoinette as a madwoman. In actuality, her madness comes from a myriad of external forces: from her position as being in between cultures but part of none, from deep childhood trauma and neglect from her mother, and from mental and emotional abuse at the hands of Rochester himself.

Rochester’s abuse of Antoinette and his bringing about her final descent into madness cannot be discussed without doing so in terms of Antoinette’s connection with nature and with the island. Dominica is the place that gave her life and vitality, but its people kept her at arm’s length, never allowing her to fully be a part of the island. While the island in its entirety is a wild-yet-beautiful place, Antoinette only feels safe in her walled backyard, her own personal Eden. The island is a place where people like Antoinette who remain as vestiges of the slave system are not welcome by the inhabitants, but who are seen with fair eyes by Nature.

Antoinette’s connection with the island is what grounds her and is something from which she cannot escape, and Rochester’s removing her from the island is the final straw that turns her madness into tragedy. Much of Rochester’s abuse is born out of his fear of the island itself and his resentment that he cannot control it and dominate it. Rochester is the product of the culture which colonized Dominica; his position as a colonizer creates the need in him to be able to control his surroundings. Likewise, his masculinity dictates that he be able to control the women

in his life. Since he cannot control his physical surroundings (the island), he focuses on that which he can control: Antoinette.

Antoinette's initial description of Coulibri as a wild and disheveled version of the Garden of Eden brings to mind a stark contrast with a British take on Eden, namely John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I choose Milton as a foil for Antoinette's depiction of Eden because he is British, like Rochester, so we can assume that, at least on some level, Milton's description would be similar to the outlook that Rochester would take. By viewing these two descriptions of paradisiacal gardens, the reader can understand better the reason that Dominica would have frightened Rochester so much. See Antoinette's description of her home:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered—then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. (19)

Compare that with the description of Eden from Milton's perspective: The contrast between the two is notable; the former presents a wild, unpredictable beauty while the latter presents the more traditional, ordered, ethereal Eden, a more "British" Eden, perhaps:

A happy rural seat of various view:
Groves whose rich Trees wept odorous Gums and Balm,
Others whose fruit burnish with Golden Rind

Hung amiable, *Hesperian* Fables true,
If true, here only, and of delicious taste:
Betwixt them Lawns, or level Downs and Flocks
Grazing the tender herb, were interpos'd,
Or palmy hillock, or the flow'ry lap
Of some irriguous Valley spread her store,
Flow'rs of all hue, and without Thorn the Rose:
Another side, umbrageous Grots and Caves
Of cool recess o'er which the mantling Vine
Lays forth her purple Grape, and gently creeps
Luxuriant; meanwhile murmuring waters fall
Down the slope hills, disperst, or in a Lake,
That to the fringed Bank with Myrtle crown'd,
Her crystal mirror holds, unite thir streams. (247-263)

Milton presents a tranquil garden, colored in gold and purple, full of thornless roses. The vine "lays forth" her fruit and "gently creeps." The waterfall is described as "murmuring," seeming quiet rather than wild. The bank is "fringed," orderly instead of overgrown. Milton calls the garden "a happy seat." Compare this with Rhys's Eden where "the paths were overgrown" and smells of dead flowers mingle with the smell of the living ones. In Milton's Eden, there are no dead flowers; there is no death. Consider Milton's image of a gentle vine, "creeping" and full of purple grapes; contrast this with Rhys's description of the Orchid with "tentacles," "bare leaves," and a "twisted root." When it blooms, though, it is full of vibrant colors, "wonderful to see." In Rhys's Eden, beauty and ugliness, life and death are intermingled; it is not a perfect

place, and yet it is still incredibly beautiful. One can draw a parallel between Antoinette and Rhys's Eden itself, as she is beautiful (like Milton's version of Eden), but also wild, a mixture of beauty and pain. Rochester notes at one point that she looks like "she might have been any pretty English girl" (Rhys 71), suggesting that he can see that which is within her that lines up with his perception of beauty, the "ordered Eden," if you will.

In both Edens, Rochester is Adam; Antoinette is Eve. In Milton's version, Eve is pure and innocent, the unwitting victim of the cunning of the serpent. In Rhys's novel, Antoinette is also innocent and becomes an unwitting victim of the poor choice of her stepfather which resulted in her expulsion from the island. However, in Rochester's view, Antoinette/Eve is cunning, seeking power and knowledge and seducing the unwitting Adam into tasting the forbidden fruit (her sexuality). Since Rochester's first meeting with Antoinette occurred while she was in the convent, his expectation was along the lines of Milton's Eve: innocent, meek, trusting, and obedient. Upon arriving at the island, though, he finds a different "Eve," since Antoinette has been returned to her natural environment. Rochester finds himself drawn to Antoinette's passion, vibrancy, and sexuality, but at the same time afraid of the unknown world it opens to him. Like a blind man who has just begun to see, the colors, sights, and smells are too much for Rochester. What Antoinette describes as a beautiful wilderness, Rochester calls "menacing," saying, "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (69-70). However, he is quickly overtaken by Antoinette's passion, noticing "the sweetness of the air . . . an intoxicating freshness as if all this had never been breathed before" (73). Rochester, at least temporarily, falls under the spell of the island which frees him to feel passionately for Antoinette; he refers to the air with "an intoxicating freshness," and then

describes his experience of the land as new territory, something that “had never been breathed before.” A parallel can be drawn with Antoinette and the island itself here; their relationship was new, and she, as a young woman, would have been untouched, something that “never had been breathed before” (sexually). The uncharted territory of the island and Antoinette herself is something that temporarily intoxicates Rochester, awakening passions that would have been considered more Creole and less British.

If Rochester is Adam to Antoinette’s Seductress-Eve, then the remaining catalyst becomes the serpent, the crafty beast with whom Eve conspires to seduce Adam, enticing him away from his world of order and his position of power as male and colonizer. The serpent would need to be an “other,” a marginalized character operating outside the parameters of the dominating force of Adam and, at least in Rhys’s Eden, against his influence and control of Eve/Antoinette. Rhys’s serpent, then, must be Christophine, Antoinette’s companion, surrogate mother, and connection to her identity as an islander and not as a member of the British colonial invaders. Rochester’s preferred vision of Eden with uniformity and a clear power structure views Christophine as a rogue evil force, keeping Antoinette tied to the island and to an identity which both disturbs and frightens him. Rhys’s Garden of Eden takes Milton’s Eden and stands it on its ear, and as such, the serpent, rather than being an enemy to them both, is a protector of Eve, trying to keep her grounded in her wild, vibrant garden. Like the serpent, Christophine is perhaps someone to be feared; her power goes beyond nature into the realm of the supernatural; her obeah magic allows her a higher level of control of those around her, whether or not she chooses to use it. Interestingly, Missy Kubitschek notes that “Christophine remains a part of the island’s lush foliage, undifferentiated from other secondary characters and places that make up the background for Antoinette’s destruction” (26). Kubitschek is saying here that Christophine is

timeless, unchanging, like the island itself. Such a quality lends itself to her supernatural presence and power; she is one of the only forces that exists outside of time for Antoinette, and as such, she has a power that Rochester lacks. Eden's serpent is a dividing force, whether it be Milton's or Rhys's; it comes between Adam and Eve, just as Christophine's presence comes between Antoinette and Rochester. As a result, Rochester threatens her and sends her away, beginning his final plan to escape the island and for what Missy Kubitschek calls "the final obliteration" (24), the destruction of Antoinette's mind.

Rochester begins her obliteration while they are still on the island, renaming her "Bertha." In one of Antoinette's final few acts of resistance, she lets Rochester know that she is fully aware of his motives, saying "'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too'" (Rhys 147). While her act of resistance is futile and does not make an ultimate difference in her fate, she makes Rochester aware that, whether or not he denies it to himself, he is no better than she; he just has different methods of "obeah." Interestingly, Rochester fears and hates Obeah and its deep roots on the island, but pays no attention to the fact that his psychological abuse of her is not all that different. By renaming her, he casts a spell on her, turning her from *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Antoinette to *Jane Eyre's* Bertha. As such, the nature of the island (and indigenous religions therein) affect him more than he realizes or is willing to admit. To hate Antoinette, Rochester must strip her of her identity by renaming her; he must remove her identity from the island itself before he can physically move her back to England and lock her up. "Antoinette" drew forth his passion, which both frightened and enticed him. To remember her that way would not allow him to bury his own experience on the island. As much as he is not willing to recognize or admit, Rochester, too, is changed by the island and by Antoinette, and to restore his previous identity, he must strip

Antoinette of hers, renaming her something more British, but also more flat-sounding. His decision to rename her is a power play on his part; he shows her that he does not care about this island that made her, and that he no longer cares for her as a person with an identity. Because of her position as a female in a male-dominated culture, she has no recourse to combat his actions.

To Antoinette, removal from her beloved island is tantamount to death. The island is her heartbeat; not only does it provide her a sense of grounding and history, but it also nourishes her soul. Its lush and vibrant landscape is her personal Eden, the place where she feels that she is destined to dwell forever. Christophine and Sandi are there, her true family; it is a place of sun and water and growth. To Rochester, though, it is a wild place of fear and uncertainty, of racial tensions and evil magic. Rather than admitting that he was taken in by the place and by Antoinette, as Laura Cilokowski says, “He imagines himself to be the unsuspecting victim of a highly infectious female carrier of disease” (346). He is able to absolve himself from any responsibility for the failure of their marriage and, in fact, blames the entire debacle on her “disease” (passion and sexuality). His hatred is complete and, at this point, to give Antoinette the satisfaction of staying in Dominica while he returns to England would not be a proper punishment. Instead, with what Rose Kamel calls “methodical sadism” (12), he imprisons Antoinette in his “cardboard mansion,” whose greys stand in stark contrast with the colorful Caribbean island. England is a place of grey and green, of fog and dampness, of stagnation. Antoinette’s friend tells her at one point, “London is like a cold dark dream” (Rhys 80), and Antoinette’s last days certainly bear out this concept. In happier times with Rochester, she tells him of the island, “I love it more than anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person” (89). Carine Mardorossian calls Rochester’s attic “the othered space against which his English house can define itself” (81). This is true; his attic is full with his dark, troubled history

and the object of his hatred. This prison cell is a tiny, ambivalent pocket of resistance in his otherwise British home. It is also located at the highest point of Thornfield, at the “top of the head.” Such positioning places the attic and Antoinette as a part of the “brain” or “consciousness” of the house itself. Perhaps she is actually its conscience, an ever-present reminder to Rochester of his past and current transgressions.

Rochester describes his hatred of Antoinette:

I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (172)

He is unable to express his hatred for Antoinette without also transferring that hatred onto the island itself which, according to the *Online Feminist Journal*, are “all neatly wrapped up into one package,” and which “[Rochester] intends to erase completely” (16). Ripping her from the island is his one surefire way to break her mentally.

Kubitschek calls her jump from the window a “vengeful suicide” that is “the only means of rediscovering and affirming her earlier self in England and English culture” (26). While I agree that there are aspects of vengeance in her decision to burn down her prison and her captor, I see her jump more as a desperate attempt to reconnect with the only identity she had. Her last vision of a burning home was Coulibri when she was a child, as Coco tried to fly from the roof but fell instead, on fire and shouting “Quien est la?” (“what is this?”), lost and confused. Antoinette, too, jumps from a burning home, lost and confused, not vengeful and angry. She

jumps into the pool in Dominica, reaching out to Tia, her childhood friend, correcting their last encounter which resulted in blood and tears. Perhaps Antoinette's vision was to fly back to Dominica, to carry herself back to the island that gave her life, but, just as Coco did at Coulibri, she instead falls to the ground, on fire, without a clear sense of what she seeks to do. Vengeance plays only a small part in her decision to end her life. In fact, Mary Lou Emery describes her suicide in terms of empowerment:

Antoinette's displaced identity changes again: all at once, the colors and smells, the gardens and people of her island home appear in the sky made red now by the fire that spreads from the candles she has knocked onto the red curtains. This color red, whose flames had once destroyed her home, now becomes her personal magic, fetishized in the red dress she claims and the name she once embroidered "in fire red." She calls on her black friends and this time they do not betray one another. (428)

Emery describes the scene in terms of victory with energy swelling throughout each word. Antoinette, although lacking lucidity, is washed over with memories of where she comes from and who she is, strengthening herself enough to take physical action to escape her prison.

Adjarian notes that "for those like [Antoinette] who inhabit the space of inbetween, no closure, such as that provided by definitions and conclusive endings, can exist" (208). While I am not entirely certain whether Antoinette really experiences closure, I do believe that, in her delusional state, she believed she would achieve closure upon jumping back into the pool in Dominica with Tia. Additionally, she becomes "black" in death in two ways; first, she sets fire to Thornfield, just as the Black islanders did to Coulibri in her childhood; second, because she burns to death, turning her skin charred black. Physically, she achieves her desire to be Black,

but unfortunately, it is at the cost of her life. In actuality, that may be the best that she could have hoped for by then. Kamel points out that, in the end, the same result comes about for Bertha/Antoinette in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*: “an inarticulate creature, distanced from Jamaica and fissured from herself” (15). Neither character meets her end triumphantly, but instead dies just as lost as she lived, exiled from home, country, and family. Both Antoinette and Bertha are madwomen, and both die by suicide. Rhys gives what Brontë denies Antoinette: justification for her madness and a death that is less vengeful than tragic. As a child just as much as an adult, Antoinette simply wanted “peace and quiet,” the same peace and quiet that her own mother desired. As a child, she was able to escape into her Eden, to escape to Christophine’s room or to the pool with Tia. The burning of Coulibri forced all eyes of the island on her family and forced them to leave rather than to be able to continue existing in relative peace and quiet. In the convent, Antoinette is able to have peace and quiet; she does well in school and makes a friend or two and is in a safe environment without outside influence or judgment. Her life becomes progressively less and less peaceful as she becomes more and more mad; she is forced to marry Rochester by her stepbrother (two men who she does not even know), and upon moving back to Coulibri, she is unable to have the place to herself; she must try to convince Rochester that the wild Eden in which they live is actually beautiful and free. When Rochester loses passion and interest in her and becomes wary of her instead, her peaceful environment becomes stressful, leading her to try to use Obeah to bring him back to her. The beautiful corners of her world turn dark and mysterious and she cannot trust the one person with whom she must spend most of her time; her peace and quiet is permanently disrupted. Thus, her madness progressively develops over the course of the constant disruption of her environment and mind. Her death seems vindictive because she has burned Rochester’s home and terribly wounded him in the

process, but in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, just before she has the dream (premonition) of what she is about to do, we encounter an Antoinette living nearly fully in delusion, looking for her red dress that reminds her of the island and thinking of Sandi, who is ambiguously either her half-brother or lover (or both). Her thoughts are not so much of Rochester and what he has done to her, but instead they are on Dominica and on the feelings and memories of her former life there. One must note that, during her suicide premonition, she never refers to Rochester as someone she hates; she calls him “the man who hated me” (189). Hatred appears to have played little part in her decision to burn the house. In fact, during her dream, it appears as she drops the candles almost by accident, but is so taken in by the beautiful red color of the fire that she continues to pick up new candles on the way back and drop them as well. .

Additionally, it seems as though her actions of burning Thornfield may have a more psychological effect; she may be reenacting her memory of the burning of Coulibri because it was a point in which her life changed forever and there was no going back. In burning Thornfield, she changes her future (short-lived, of course,), perhaps even trying to return to her former life before the negative changes that drove her to madness. By reenacting the home-burning scene of her youth while trying to leap into the pool where Tia awaits, Antoinette is seeking to escape, to escape from the life that drove her mad and to escape to the place that made her feel safe. In the process, her charred body turns the black color that she’d wanted in life, but is, of course, at the expense of her life itself. She dies fully in her delusion and, if we continue on with Brontë’s novel to the final end of Rochester’s story, he finds love with Jane and lives happily ever after, freed from the legal burden of his first wife. Antoinette receives a final blow to her dignity even in death in that she does not even achieve at what vengeance she would have wanted.

Criticism is varied on the novel's placement within feminist and postcolonial theory. Mardorossian notes that initial literary discussion overlooked the colonial aspect of the book for the sake of issues of gender. As Mardorossian says, "The interpretations of feminist novels as the struggle of a heroine against oppressive patriarchal forces was soon scrutinized and criticized for positing a distinctive and essential female condition and ignoring the varied circumstances of women's oppression" (80-81). To read *Wide Sargasso Sea* solely in terms of the oppression of patriarchal structures is to overlook the larger backdrop against which these gender issues are enacted. Missy Kubitschek believes that Antoinette's ultimate life circumstances are the result of her own poor choices and that the true heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Christophine; as she says, "Antoinette participates in her own destruction: her choices matter, and she chooses badly. Although it remains sympathetic to Antoinette, the novel does not offer merely another helpless victim of a patriarchal, imperialist system. Instead, *Wide Sargasso Sea* contrasts Antoinette's self-destructive attempts to assimilate with Christophine's successful preservation of her marginal status" (24). While I can see Kubitschek's point, I believe that her statement may be an overcorrection of earlier criticism and may err on the side of overlooking Antoinette's position of powerlessness because of the patriarchal power structures which are in place for her and which also do not exist for Christophine. In "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading the Orange," Josephine Donovan discusses the concept of using signifiers to remove the agency of the signified. She uses the terms "animal," and "meat" as an example; "animal is the signified, but "meat" is the signifier chosen that removes what she calls the "thou-ness" of the signified (162). The word "meat" removes any aspect of "person" from the animal. I see Antoinette's placement within this framework; Brontë uses the signifier "madwoman" for the character "Bertha," thus removing her humanity. Rhys attempts to give Antoinette her "thou-ness" back, to give her

agency as a person rather than as a “white cockroach,” “Creole,” or “madwoman.” However, Rhys does that at the expense of Antoinette’s agency within the novel itself; Rhys plays upon Antoinette’s weakness to create a character who can only attain agency in self-destruction. As such, madness becomes a failure for Antoinette, as it consumes her and destroys her. However, for Rhys, Antoinette’s madness becomes an effective tool to combat both patriarchal and colonial systems

CHAPTER TWO

GHOSTS OF NOSTALGIA: *OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD'S* MERCEDES SANTINIO

Oscar Hijuelos's first novel, *Our House in the Last World*, published in 1983, is a semiautobiographical work, loosely based on his childhood growing up in New York as a child of Cuban immigrants during the 1950s and 1960s. The novel is an attempt, as Hijuelos describes it, "to recreate the complex atmosphere of hopefulness, despair, and longing that my older brother and I had to pass through" (Hijuelos 7). In his interview with Oscar Hijuelos, Luke Epplin describes *Our House in the Last World* as being "heavily autobiographical" in that it "centers on a working class family very much like Hijuelos's own" (2). While Hijuelos does not actually suggest that his mother became mentally ill or delusional, he does note in the interview with Epplin that his "mother never really got used to having to adapt to a new system" (5). His novel is the story of a Cuban couple, Mercedes and Alejo Santinio, who immigrate to the U.S. in search of opportunity and a better life and instead find hardship. They are forced to live with Alejo's family in a small apartment, barely making enough to live, and Alejo grows increasingly alcoholic and abusive as the years pass. They have two children, Horacio and Hector (Hijuelos's character), who have difficulty navigating their lives due to their father's abuse and mother's anxiety. While Hector is young, Mercedes takes him and his brother to Cuba on an extended vacation, where he contracts a near-fatal kidney disease and must spend a year in a hospital, where he is forced to speak English and loses much of his identity as a Cuban American. Eventually, Alejo's lifestyle of alcoholism, gluttony, and cheating catches up with him and he dies, leaving Mercedes alone with her two adult children; her life after that is a rapid downward spiral into madness that results in her complete delusional behavior and death.

While the novel itself may focus on Hector's coming of age, *Hijuelos* chooses to begin his story with the courtship of Hector's young mother and father in Cuba before their journey to the U.S. Mercedes and Alejo meet as teenagers while she is working at the ticket booth of a local movie theater. Their courtship is traditional; he visits her at her job several times and they spend time together at each other's parents' homes. Their relationship appears to be loving and innocent from the beginning. They are married, and once Alejo decides that he will not be able to have the life he wants in Cuba, he decides to immigrate to the U.S. and Mercedes follows. Part of Alejo's downfall, which in turn brings about Mercedes' mental breakdown, is his romanticized notion of what life in the U.S. will be like; he believes that he will become wealthy without having to do hard work like he would have to in Cuba to be successful.

Throughout the novel, Mercedes Santinio becomes increasingly mad through a series of events which victimize and isolate her. Like *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Antoinette Cosway, Mercedes' early life lays the groundwork for mental illness. Likewise, Mercedes must move to the U.S., which she does not want to do, and she is made to live in a radically different environment in which she feels uncomfortable and isolated. Also, she suffers at the hands of Alejo's abuse and falls to a major mental break; at the end of the novel, the reader finds her, similar to Antoinette, caught up in an inner monologue which precedes her death.

Mercedes Santinio begins her journey to madness in much the same way as Rhys's Antoinette, among the ranks of the "previously wealthy." She begins her life in "an immense house of white stone, in the best residential district of the city of Holguín, across the way from a park with towering royal palms," where "saints and angels walked in gardens" (*Hijuelos* 12). The house itself was spectacular: "It had twenty rooms and carved mahogany arabesque doors, fine iron grillwork of stars and flowers. It had a large central gallery, a shaded rear patio of pink and

blue tiles, and a courtyard with large potted palms and an arched entranceway” (12). Once her father dies, leaving precious little for his family, her mother must sell the beautiful home and move to Arachoa Street, “one of the roads the farmers took on their way to market” (17). The previous phrase is the only description offered of their new home and, quite often, what is not said can be more important than what is said. No physical description of the house itself is offered, just its location which, by its positioning on a road that the farmers use, shows that Mercedes’ family is now among the lower class. With as many details as are offered about Mercedes’ first house, the lack of description of this second house further demonstrates her loss of identity. She previously identified herself with her father and with her homeplace, and now that she has lost both, she finds her life without detail, just like the new house on Arachoa Street. Like the Cosways, Mercedes’ family took an extreme financial hit upon the death of the patriarch, and as such, she is left in a position in which she must navigate the waters of a social stratum to which she is not accustomed.

Her father’s death and the family’s move to a position of mediocrity and unremarkability seem to comprise the point at which Mercedes loses her ambition and motivation. Hijuelos describes her as having “lived for her father’s approval and followed him everywhere” (14). Before her father died, she was a writer, winning composition contests and even meeting the Bishop of Havana during one of her award ceremonies. Hijuelos describes her as “very happy in those days but then things started to come down around her” (15). Now, she finds herself without a male authority to follow and without someone who can offer her approval for her achievements. It is at this point that the reader first sees the effect of the patriarchal system on Mercedes. Very little is said of her mother in the novel, but her father, Teodoro, is present throughout the novel, either in memory or via ghostly appearances. In a traditional Cuban

household, the family revolves around the father; his word is law and his wife and children continually either seek his approval or seek to minimize his wrath. Mercedes, like many Caribbean daughters, focuses on little else in her youth but seeking her father's favor. Upon Teodoro's death, she becomes consumed by memories of him, which paralyze her and sabotage her aspirations for success. She fails her entrance exam for a teacher's school because "she began to think about her dead father, and soon she couldn't answer the questions or decipher the numbers on the pages, and she broke down crying, excused herself, and ran from the examination room" (17-18). Rather than viewing this meltdown as an isolated experience, she allows it to become a defining moment, and "she never attempted the scholarship exam again" (18). Hijuelos offers a different view of the effect of patriarchy on the Cuban daughter here; the common assumption of a male-dominated society is the idea that the father generally discourages his daughters from achievement beyond being an obedient daughter and becoming a good wife. However, in the relationship between Teodoro and Mercedes, she uses the desire for his approval to push her to academic achievement and even to pursue a career outside the home. I see two reasons for this break in traditional treatment of the father/daughter relationship within a patriarchal society: first, although this particular passage in *Our House in the Last World* occurs in the 1930s, it is still recent enough that, unlike *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Antoinette, it would have been relatively normal for a woman to take certain jobs outside the home. Second, Teodoro's position of wealth and love of poetry would increase his desire to have a daughter who is both poet and teacher. This is not to say that Mercedes has the liberty to create her own identity independent of her father; however, it is interesting to observe that her desire to seek her father's approval instilled in her an ambition to make achievements in academia, which was (and is still) highly male dominated. In a sense, the patriarchal familial structure in which the father's desires

are supreme have the potential to create a daughter that seeks to fulfill them and gain his approval by following pursuits which would place her outside of (and quite possibly against) the patriarchal system within which she operates.

After Mercedes' failure at the teaching exam, she stays with her mother and watches her sisters' lives develop, and "when she became bored at home," she finally sought a job as a secretary in which "she passed a few years" (18). Once political unrest destroyed the business, "she didn't do very much for three years" (18). The bright young academic who wrote award-winning essays and poetry and who dreamt of becoming a teacher now finds herself tearing tickets at the Neptuna movie theater, doing an entirely mindless job to pass the time. The narrator notes that, when she told the stories to her children, "[I]t would amaze them that for all her ability and talent their mother ended up tearing tickets off a spool and pushing them out under the window of a gold painted booth" (18). Her lack of ambition is a noticeable shift from her younger self; she seeks work only when she is tired of being at home, and she seeks work that does not require her to think or to push herself. Note the passive language that the narrator uses to describe her; she "became bored," and "passed a few years" at her secretarial job. After that she "didn't do much." There is this sense in these phrases that she is no longer "living life," but life is instead being lived around her. Without a male influence in her life, she is actually living outside of the patriarchal culture system, and she is incapable of asserting her own agency. It appears, then, that a product of patriarchy is that, even when the woman is "freed" from the system (to whatever degree she can really be "free"), she is dissatisfied in her freedom as she has no man to serve as her navigational beacon upon which she can fixate to build her identity.

One must question whether Mercedes' extreme love of and devotion to her father is the point of origin for her later emotional breakdown. When he dies, she is faced with two choices:

she can either use his memory to push herself harder than she ever has so that, in that way, she can honor his memory and make him proud, or she can let her loss paralyze her and, in essence, stop living right along with him. It seems that she has done the latter, and although she and Alejo make a life together, she never actually “lives,” but rather merely “exists” in the shadow of a past to which she cannot return and a present that has not turned out at all like she hoped. Through such characterization, Mercedes begins to appear more and more as a ghost, not living as her source of identity has died and as Alejo does not turn into a suitable substitute.

Like Antoinette, Mercedes’ separation from Cuba further fragments her mentally. She describes her original home in Holguín in much the same way that Antoinette describes Coulibri’s garden:

Her father had filled that house with wagonloads of furniture: tables and chairs with animal feet, a piano, mirrors, Chinese vases and crystal everywhere to capture light. There were wide, pleated curtains and high arched windows that let in a serene white light, strongest in the parlor. The house was surrounded by bushes with flame blossoms and by tamarind and orange trees. Everywhere there was sunlight. Blossoms streamed down the walls and between the slats of the white picket fence. Flowers were everywhere (12-13).

Her home is described as a bright vibrant place, with emphasis placed on brightness and light. Light streams in through the windows and in the garden, and since her father loves light so much, she does too. In the above passage, the light is described as “serene,” creating a feeling of peace, and the windows are large, to let in as much light as possible. Stephen Zoegall specifically notes Teodoro’s connection in Mercedes’ mind to light, saying that Teodoro was “manifest in the sunlight refracted by all the crystal in the house” (30). The view into the backyard is of the

orchard, and the bushes are described as having “flame blossoms” and the trees are full of fruit. Even the fence is covered with flowers; a parallel can be drawn here with Antoinette Cosway’s Edenic garden in her backyard, which was her place of solitude and a place from which she drew her strength. Special notice should be paid to the mention of flowers, both here and in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; flowers are often associated with femininity and sexuality. Antoinette’s and Mercedes’ safe places are also overflowing with femininity and sensuality. Here in her first home, Mercedes has the good memories of her father associated with the brightness of the sun and the vividness of the foliage. Additionally, the house is described as being filled with “wagonloads” of furniture; the home is cluttered, which parallels with the slightly-disheveled, wild Eden of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s Coulibri. However, neither location is portrayed negatively in terms of its disorder or clutter, but is described as being more beautiful because of it. Both Mercedes and Antoinette find peace and creativity in bright, yet disordered beauty.

Mercedes’ and Alejo’s New York home stands in stark contrast to her childhood home; it is “squeezed between the sinister reaches of Harlem and the shadow of the University” (36), a description which already creates an atmosphere of darkness, fear, and claustrophobia. Additionally, this description highlights the in-between-ness that the Santinios feel upon their settling in the U.S. Their apartment is between “the sinister reaches of Harlem,” with its high poverty and crime rates, but is in the shadow of Columbia. It is near the university, but not a part of it and is overshadowed by it. Such description symbolizes a problem suffered by many immigrants in the U.S.: they are often overshadowed or left behind by educational institutions and as such, their options are limited. Zoegall describes their location as being “where Columbia University presses north with gentrification while Harlem pushes south with crime” (20). That the Santinios must live in the shadow of the university foreshadows that they will not achieve

what they had hoped. Instead of palm trees and flowers that were everywhere, New York is full of “poison oak and thick bushes” (36), further emphasizing the feeling of danger and of being trapped. Where Mercedes’ childhood yard is full of bushes with “flame blossoms,” the bushes in New York are just thick and full of poison oak, which, if left unchecked, can grow to choke the life out of other plants. The lack of foliage to provide any beauty creates a bleak landscape for Mercedes.

The apartment itself further demonstrates the oppressive and limiting setting in which Mercedes now finds herself; she and Alejo only had “a tiny room at the end of the hall” (37). First, their room is tiny, and then, it is located down a hallway, isolated from the central portions of the house where daily activities of life take place. For Mercedes and Alejo to have any time to themselves, they must also completely isolate themselves from the others in the house. Next, their view from their window was of “the street, garbage, the sidewalk, a black Victorian looking gate into a front courtyard in which hung laundry lines, and a brick building with people in the windows” (37). For a woman who drew much of her happiness from light streaming in through windows and views of orange and tamarind trees outside, to look out into a concrete sidewalk and bags of garbage would be disorienting. Additionally, she specifically mentions that there are people in the windows of the building across the street; later in the novel, it becomes apparent that part of Mercedes psychosis is manifested through paranoia, and it seems as though a view through her window of other people staring at her creates an environment that would encourage paranoia. When viewed together, Mercedes’ home and the New York apartment appear as polar opposites: her first home is a calm, bright place with which she associates her father, and the apartment is a place of confinement, disorientation, and scrutiny, which she now begins to associate with Alejo. Since Alejo has become the new patriarchal figure on which she fixates,

associating him with her new hellish environment puts her in a position of emotional conflict between loyalty to her father's memory or faith in her new "father-figure," who does not seem to be an effective leader.

Later, Alejo and Mercedes are given the opportunity to buy land in Miami, which was "a better place to raise a family. Sweet with flower smells and a pleasant ocean wind, it was warm like Cuba and had no harsh winters. There were palm trees and orchids everywhere" (52). Miami's description is uncannily similar to the way she describes Cuba, and it would seem that a move there would go a long way toward soothing Mercedes' mind and soul. However, Alejo buys swampland in New Jersey instead, and the reader can see Mercedes' anger at his unwillingness to listen to his sister Buita when she recommended the Miami land purchase, especially in light of the fact that he believes everything else Buita says. Alejo's decision hurts Mercedes in two ways; first, he deliberately chooses not to move to an environment that would be better suited for her and that would soothe her nerves. Second, though, he fails to take Buita's advice the one time when it would have actually helped Mercedes. As will be discussed shortly, Buita continually encourages Alejo to take actions which alienate and hurt Mercedes, and he always agrees, paying no attention to the effect it has on his wife. However, when she suggests that he move the family to Miami, which would have been beneficial to Mercedes, he declines her advice and remains in the apartment that Mercedes has already described as being prison-like and in a city which appears dark, foreboding, and dangerous to her. His decision may be seen as further symptoms of his position as the dominant male in his family; he believes that he is making the better decision buying land in New Jersey, and to accept Buita's advice on a major life decision would be to put himself in a position of subordination to her, which would not be acceptable in his understanding of their social structure. Mercedes' position as a woman and

therefore a subordinate in the relationship diminishes the validity of any requests or advice that she could offer to Alejo; the dictates of the patriarchal culture in which she matured should have made her familiar with the fact that her suggestions and opinions carry no weight. However, his decision to ignore her and his refusal to move her to a place that would undoubtedly be healthier for her shows Mercedes that she is not an object of value to Alejo, which further destroys her sense of self worth and her ability to develop a sense of identity.

Mercedes' abuse from Alejo's family is another significant contributor to her mental breakdown; it begins with her sister-in-law, Buita, and continues even through to her youngest son, Hector. Hijuelos is not kind to Buita; she is a completely unsympathetic character who is characterized as a monster: "Buita was harsh and liked to give orders; she was physically huge, good-looking but not pretty. A jealous woman, she criticized people easily. Although she was fervently religious and owned a chest of crucifixes, she had no real interest in the suffering of others; her soul was eight feet high and made of chain mail and armor" (25). She is Mercedes' opposite; she is large and hulking where Mercedes is small and delicate. She is bossy, haughty, and impenetrable where Mercedes is meek, anxious, and easily swayed.

Since Mercedes is already easily intimidated and lacks a sense of self, she enters the familial relationship at a disadvantage; this is a significant point. Mercedes' damaged sense of self-worth and agency has already put her in a position of subordination whether or not Alejo's family is abusive toward her. She is ill-equipped to deal with the conflict of antagonistic family members and, therefore, she is an easy target for their abuse. Buita never gives Mercedes a chance to become part of the family; her nearly incestuous love of her brother puts her in direct competition with Mercedes, and most of the time, Buita wins. When she and her husband come to New York to stay, she creates an atmosphere of hostility that takes the already-fragile

Mercedes and isolates her from her own husband and children, driving her into fits of rage and despair. Buita takes the family on outings to tourist spots on New York, but “did not like going anywhere with Mercedes and always convinced Alejo to leave her at home, alone” (45). She constantly badgers Mercedes and makes her feel weak and worthless, and “Alejo never said a word to defend her” (45). Buita’s hatred of Mercedes, coupled with her influence over her brother, causes him to ignore the damage that he causes Mercedes due to his refusal to stand up for her. In this case, it is his lack of action on her behalf that isolates her and damages any sense of security that she draws from him.

Alejo’s verbal and physical abuse, however, is the most troublesome and does the most damage to Mercedes’ already-fragmented mental stability. It is his position of being both her abuser and her sole source of support that makes her into the madwoman that she becomes once he dies. After her father passes away, Mercedes lacks a male authority figure in her life, and up until that point, she thrived on the love and approval of her father. Her life became listless and directionless without his presence. In yet another effect of a patriarchal social structure, Mercedes draws her sense of self worth from the approval of a man in her life; first, it was her father, and then, it was Alejo. She depends on him to take care of the household, finances, and her, and she believes that her life will be stable with him. This system of female submission and approval-seeking creates an environment that can be conducive to abuse, since a woman is far less apt to stand up to her abuser when he is her source of support and she has been raised and taught to seek his approval and make him happy no matter what.

One cannot pass the entire blame onto Alejo, however. He is partly a product of his own culture, one of Cuban *machismo*, where he must not show weakness or tenderness lest he be thought to be weak or effeminate. He takes his family to America so that he may become

successful and instead ends up living in a tiny, dark, cramped apartment, making just enough money to scrape by as a chef. He romanticized the U.S., believing that success and opportunity would be abundant and easy to attain. In keeping with another social norm of Cuban *machismo*, Alejo spends most of his money on lavish acts of generosity for others during his trip to the U.S. and in his first days there. To appear uncharitable would indicate to other men that he is too poor to afford to spend and give away money on a whim. However, Alejo's mistake is in believing that wealth will be easy in the U.S. A few poor business decisions, including his failure to buy land in Miami (which would skyrocket in value over the years) further humiliate him and lead him to use alcohol to deal with his emotions. The Cuban diet is full of rich foods, so he is already operating at a disadvantage where health is concerned. His job in the hotel allows him to surreptitiously drink on the job, and his tendency to drink when happy or sad also places his health in a precarious situation. Bad investments bring about shame and financial hardship, both of which damage his pride.

None of this is to diminish the damage caused by his emotional and physical abuse of Mercedes, but one must recognize that Alejo is also a victim. He is a victim of a broken patriarchal system which gives the male *carte blanche* dominion over the female, and which emasculates him when he fails to maintain his authority over her or when he fails to be successful. With so many things at hand to put his masculinity at stake, he attempts to cope as best he can, which unfortunately seems to be with food, liquor, and other women. Alejo's behavior contrasts with Mercedes' memory of her father; the novel is not clear as to whether or not her father was better to her than Alejo, but her memory of him certainly is better. While the culture of *machismo* and patriarchal control is common in Cuba, immigration to the U.S. exacerbates the situation. Not only does Alejo have to impress other Cubans with which he has

contact in the U.S., but he now carries the weight of trying to impress men from other ethnic groups with different or additional expectations as to how he must behave to be seen as a successful head of his household. Additionally, he suffers from the vestiges of a colonialist society in the U.S., one that sees minority groups as a subordinate class, so Alejo is already coming from a place of emasculation in that he will always be an “other” to white, American society, which means he will always be at a disadvantage in terms of financial success and will struggle for professional achievement.

However understandable his actions are in light of his position as a Cuban man and as a failure in America, it is undeniable that his abuse of Mercedes is what puts her at the very brink of mental breakdown, and his death is what ultimately throws her into a tailspin of delusion and, depending on how one reads the end of the book, of death also. From the very beginning of their marriage, Mercedes fears being left behind by Alejo; when he decides to go to America, she is overwhelmed with paranoia at the thought that he may go without her. The narrator describes her as “dwelling on this possibility” and says that “she spent many of her days with her mother and sisters, weeping and suffering from a case of racked nerves” (30). While she is somewhat excited by the thought of escaping Buiter’s influence, the decision to leave her family and her country is not her own, something which further fuels her resentment and paranoia much later, when Alejo has become a drunken, detached, and violent man.

The signs of Alejo’s abusive personality are evident early on in his relationship with Mercedes, as he carelessly spends money on the boat trip to America, not thinking of Mercedes or the fact that they will need something to live on while he is looking for work. His irresponsibility upsets Mercedes, damaging the sense of stability that she thought marriage would bring her. Alejo’s cheating, drinking, and overeating are his way of coping with his own

failure, but these coping mechanisms are also forms of abuse for Mercedes. Alejo's broken mechanism for dealing with his emotional problems are further evidence of the broken patriarchal system: his method of coping with his failure dictates that he abuse Mercedes, while Mercedes' method of coping with Alejo's abuse dictate that she destroy herself.

Her paranoia only grows when Hector catches a near-fatal kidney infection during their sojourn back to Cuba. Now, even the place for which she had longed for years and years has turned into an enemy, "a place of disease and death" (88). Her mental illness grows with Hector's physical illness; convinced that he will die, "she saw tiny coffins, cemetery stones, flowers, stoic-faced families walking through cemetery gates and down winding paths, heads bowed; she saw children crying and her mother crying. She saw her father's funeral winding through the cobblestone streets of Holguín" (88-89). Hector's illness brings her immediately to the vivid memory of her father's death, the pivotal emotional trauma in her life thus far. Once they return home, she becomes obsessive about *micróbios*, as though any exposure to any foreign matter will kill Hector instantly. However, in addition to her paranoia and obsession about germs, she is also faced with the fact that her beloved Cuba almost killed her son. Her memories of the beauty of the island will forever be tainted (infected, perhaps) with mental images of sickness and death, and she knows that her son's health will never be the same again because of Cuba. In light of that, Cuba itself becomes "foreign" to her, and now she is not only isolated from others in her environment in New York, she is also isolated in mind and heart from the place to which she dreams that she will return. In light of Hector's health, Mercedes' obsessive and overbearing attitude only serves to drive Alejo further away as he blames her both for Hector's Irish appearance (because of her family lineage) and for his Americanization; he yells at her, "You made the boy that way. You'd better take care of him, or out you go!" (98). After

years of being abused and dismissed, Mercedes reaches a breaking point and “gave up, became resigned to the situation. She grew thin and pale from worry and then lost her spirit” (138). After losing her spirit, Mercedes begins a rapid decline.

The traumas that Mercedes has endured and the inhospitable environment in which she must live explain the basis for her fretful, nervous, emotionally unstable mental state. However, it is her coping mechanisms that both demonstrate her madwoman tendencies and, as a result, push her over the edge into delusion once Alejo dies. Nostalgia is her means of escape from the pain and uncertainty of her world, specifically nostalgia for her life in Holguín and for her father. In her thesis discussing memory and nostalgia in Hijuelos’s novels, Lauren Ceretti describes nostalgia as “a fondness for the past mixed with a longing to get back there” (8). Because of this, nostalgia can be a dangerous thing; it traps Mercedes in the joys of the past, leaving her to feel that life will never be as joyful again and as if her best days have already passed. Ceretti further describes it as Mercedes’ way of “[keeping] people in her life that would otherwise have passed from it” (16). Mercedes’ nostalgia, however, is of a fictionalized relationship with her father, where he is supportive and loving, when in reality, he was abusive just as Alejo is. As Ceretti says, “Mercedes’s [sic] happy memories of Cuba are tied more to the love she received from her father and contrasted with the unhappy situation with her husband Alejo, but her memories of her father are themselves fabricated in the form of dreams and often fictional and selective” (13). What she is describing here is Mercedes’ connection to place through her father; what she longs for is her former sense of identity as her father’s daughter.

Just as with her first home, her longing for the past is not so much connected to place as it is to her father and to the patriarchal structure upon which she based her sense of self in her youth. Since she has watched Alejo’s failure and can no longer trust that he is a suitable male

authority figure on which to base her identity, she naturally devolves into nostalgia for her father, as he is the last point in which she can remember feeling as though she had a sense of self. However, her sense of self then was a false one, as it was not based on her own personality, opinions, and abilities, but instead was based on her father. She was (and is) not her own person, but is instead who the male authority figure in her life wishes her to be; since she can neither trust Alejo to be that figure on which she bases herself or become who he wants her to be, she is unable to create an identity which would help divert her attention from dwelling on nostalgic memories of the past. Near the end of the novel, she finally remembers Teodoro as he was, the father who beat her for staying out in the rain, who told her, “you dream too much” (201). Since she has lacked stability for much of her life, she invents it in remembering a blissful childhood and a beautiful relationship with her father, one to which no man could ever compare.

Mercedes’ stories of her childhood in Cuba were so blissful that Hector and Horacio often weren’t sure whether or not they were even true, as she often invented things in her stories. Stephen Zoegall describes her memories as having a “hallucinatory quality” (32), an apt description as most of her memories come in the form of dreams and stories; it becomes hard to tell when she is simply remembering something or when she has entered into a delusion. In his doctoral dissertation, he discusses Mercedes’ memory as it is connected to place, specifically her nostalgia of Cuba as a method of coping with New York. He says that “[w]hen Mercedes needs to escape, she goes back to her house in Cuba” and that in her “memories, it is hard to determine where reality ends and imagination begins” (32). Both Zoegall and Ceretti indicate that Mercedes’ nostalgia creates a break with reality for her. Cerretti says that she “does not want to remember her past as negative because then she has nothing in this world, no fond past to look back on, no happy present to take her mind off an unpleasant past, and seemingly no hope that

the future will be any better than the present” (13). One must question at this point whether Mercedes’ madness may be more of an active decision than a passive one. Is it simply her history of loss and abuse which drive her to a breaking point, or is it also a conscious decision to venture outside the boundaries of a past and present reality with which she cannot cope? While Mercedes is characterized throughout the novel as being weak and frail, prone to outbursts and nervous chatter, perhaps she is choosing to live halfway in this world and halfway in a fictionalized past so that she can cope with her present situation. Her decision fits well with the idea of “madness as escape,” however part of Mercedes’ defeat by her madness is that she chooses to live in the fantasized world of the patriarchal system of her father. She does not wish to rebel or to become her own person and break free from her position as subordinate and unimportant because of her gender. Instead, she creates a fictional world in which she is subject to the patriarchal system, but in which she is not stifled or oppressed by it, because her fictional father values her so much. Mercedes’ madness causes her not only to create a fictionalized image of her father as a nurturing leader, but also to recreate the entire patriarchal system to make such a nurturing father possible.

Mercedes’ nostalgia creates hypersensitivity to the spiritual world and to ghosts, particularly the ghosts of her father and Alejo, providing her comfort and a sense that she has not actually been left behind. These ghosts are Mercedes’ way of remembering the men in her life the way she wished them to be rather than the way they really were. In his ghostlike form, Teodoro is attentive, encouraging, and loving, treating her like a precious and important flower in her dream of him, who wanted to take her everywhere with him (202-203). In her “flower” dream with her father, we see both Mercedes’ connection to nature and her reconstruction of the patriarchal system in which she operates. She sees herself as a flower, part of nature and also

delicate and feminine. Her father is gentle with her; he puts her in his pocket like a boutonniere, cherishing her beauty and her feminine nature. Her ghostly image of her father is not of a traditional authoritarian male, but of a gentleman who is sensitive to beauty and femininity.

Alejo's ghost is not kind to her initially; she relives her fights with him night after night, holding both sides of the argument, imitating Alejo's voice (211). Later, though, his ghost appears to her as "her lover boy" (220). She "creates" this ghost by taking his things and pretending that he is still in the house, which Hector describes as "another morning, any morning. Alejo's shoes sticking out from under the bed. The closet door open. Alejo's hat on the bureau. The bureau drawers pulled out. A pack of Alejo's cigarettes, a used coffee cup and saucer on the kitchen table. In the bathroom, wet towels slung over the racks, talcum powder on the floor" (215). When Hector confronts his mother, she insists that Alejo was actually there, just like any morning. When her friends come to visit, she only wants to hear "stories about how good she and Alejo had been to each other, how she had been a good devoted wife" (215). Not only does she remember the relationship as being healthy and loving, she also remembers herself as being nurturing and supportive; she has created in herself a "ghost" of the woman she wishes she had been as well. Near the end of the novel, by the time that Mercedes has nearly broken entirely with reality, Alejo's ghost courts her as he did before they were married. She says that "he would come to visit her around midnight. A regular suitor with gifts. He brought her flowers, a mirror, a camera. He would sit on the bed, touch her face and hair with his thick fingers" (220). She then imagines that the hallway in her apartment is a street in Holguín, and she is walking with Alejo; the kitchen becomes "the quiet afternoons in their house in San Pedro, where they played in bed" (221). Mercedes relives her relationship with Alejo in reverse; his ghost initially is just as abusive as Alejo was in real life, but the further removed Mercedes is from the actual

memory of the living Alejo, the gentler and more loving the ghost Alejo becomes. This seems to fit with her remembrance of her father as well; since she is so far removed from the scolding and disciplining he gave her, she only sees his ghost as being loving, gentle, and adoring her. Her real world becomes imaginary and the ghosts of past places and people become real. In this alternate past, Alejo throws Buita out of the house, choosing Mercedes, who he should have chosen all along. Hijuelos never states definitively whether or not the ghosts Mercedes sees are real. Stephen Zoegall believes that the ghosts are not imaginary, “but that she needs to see more of them that nature supplies” (35). However, ghosts are supernatural, so it would not seem that nature would be supplying any ghosts in her life. If “nature” is supplying these ghosts then that seems to me to be even more evidence that these ghosts are not real at all; what nature would provide is the fragmented mental state that would create an environment in Mercedes’ brain in which she “sees” these ghosts. While Hijuelos does seem to hint to the presence of real ghosts in that both Mercedes’ mother and Hector see ghosts as well, he also hints to it being her delusion in that both Teodoro’s and Alejo’s ghostly behavior does not match their earthly behavior. The fact that their ghostly behavior directly contradicts traditional patriarchal constructs of male dominance and the devaluation of female family members causes me to lean more on the side of her ghosts being a product of her nostalgic memories which cause her to break from reality.

The final pages of *Our House in the Last World* are Mercedes’ final delusion, dreamlike and very similar to Antoinette’s prophetic dream at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Mercedes remembers herself from a past life as a maid for Queen Isabella during Christopher Columbus’ time; she is a servant for the colonizing forces that create the oppressive environment in which she lives in the present. Alejo was a sailor who made the trip with Columbus to the New World; she loses him for a time, and when she finds him again, “he looked older and worn out, and one

of his legs was missing” (234) but they are married immediately. However, he begins to become lazy, does not work, and forces her to take care of him, and she does, until he dies, begging her for forgiveness. In her past life’s dying moments, she sees “a clear path to the garden where my Alejo waited, a path of light and flowers” (235). She describes a conversation that she believes to have had with Alejo before he died where she promised him “you and I will die but death will not separate us” (235), and just as she says, he appears to her as a ghost. However, this time, he describes his journey to her: “‘Do not be afraid,’ he kept telling me. ‘Do not be afraid’” (235). While it is not explicitly clear that she dies at the end of the novel, the fact that he utters to her the same words that she uttered to Alejo shortly before he died seems to indicate that Alejo is trying to help her transition into the afterlife just as he had. Mercedes, like Antoinette, makes her final escape, presumably by way of the grave. Interestingly, Stephen Zoegall calls this last passage a “privilege” for Mercedes, that she gets “the last monologic word” (18). To have gone the entire book without getting any kind of narrative authority, it seems as though having the last word would be a privilege for Mercedes; however, it is imperative to note that Mercedes’ last words are not offered in lucidity. Mercedes is fully ensconced in her delusion throughout her first-person narrative at the end of the novel. Not only is she delusional, she outlines a past relationship with Alejo where he is similarly abusive and then dies, at the very least insinuating that this cycle of abuse and death has occurred before and will occur again; it happened in “the last world,” and, as Mercedes dies and this present world becomes her last world again, she will repeat the same cycle.

While there are rebellious aspects of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s Antoinette’s mental breakdown, Mercedes’ spiral into madness is not an act of rebellion against patriarchy or, more specifically, against the men in her life. Both of the men in her life against whom she would

rebel have already died, and it is their absence in her life, rather than their devaluation of her, that causes her to go insane. Rather than rebel against the patriarchal system that oppresses her, she uses her delusions to create a system that is still patriarchal in that she derives her identity from her male authority figure (namely, her father), but that differs greatly from the reality of her society's structure. She creates a fantasy world where her father and Alejo are still her sources of identity, but where they do approve of her, value her, and cherish her, creating for her a safe place where she does not find it necessary to develop her own identity.

CHAPTER THREE

SANTERIA AND THE SEA; COPING MECHANISMS FOR DREAMING IN CUBAN'S

CELIA AND FELICIA DEL PINO

Like Oscar Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World*, Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* is semi-autobiographical in nature; Garcia's alter ego is Pilar, the granddaughter of the Del Pino family, who left Cuba at a very young age but who maintains a strong spiritual connection to the country. Garcia, too, was born in Cuba and left as a child, but her writings have been centered around the island, showing the sense of identity she draws from her Cubanness. *Dreaming in Cuban* follows the women of the Del Pino family: Grandmother Celia, daughters Lourdes and Felicia, and granddaughter Pilar, through their life events following the revolution (and earlier through Celia's letters).

Much of the novel treats the brokenness that each family member feels from traumas they experience; Celia is abandoned by a lover and marries into Jorge Del Pino's family where she is treated poorly and ultimately abandons her daughter Lourdes before being institutionalized. Lourdes is raped by a revolutionary soldier and escapes with her husband and daughter, Pilar, to New York. Celia has two more children; a daughter, Felicia, and a son, Javier. Javier moves away and has nothing to do with his family until his marriage ends, and he returns home and dies of cancer. Felicia is abused by her first husband, Hugo, who infects her with syphilis. The remainder of her life is spent in and out of dysfunctional relationships. Eventually, she finds peace in *Santería*, a nature-based Caribbean religion similar to Voodoo.

The final action of the novel surrounds a return visit by Lourdes and Pilar to see Celia where Lourdes and Pilar help Pilar's cousin, Ivanito, escape Cuba to the U.S. Celia makes peace

with being abandoned by her children and grandchildren and finally ends her life by drowning herself in the ocean. A complex novel with numerous intertwined storylines, *Dreaming in Cuban* deals with issues of identity, political leanings and the strife of different political views within the family, trauma, domestic abuse, women's struggle in a patriarchic society, and madness and suicide.

Celia and Felicia struggle most with mental and emotional problems throughout the novel. Interestingly, both madwomen in this work are shown with more complexity than in the previous novels; the clear line of progression to their psychotic breaks is not present as it was with Antoinette Mason and Mercedes Santinio. Whereas these two characters have a straight progression from abusive childhood and an inhospitable environment to abusive husband to isolation and abandonment, Celia and Felicia both seem to have genuine psychiatric problems above and beyond the unfortunate circumstances both women face. What sets Celia and Felicia apart from Antoinette and Mercedes is how they react to their environments and how they manage to create an identity even in their madness. That these two women manage to maintain their sense of self and self-agency despite their conditions puts them in a better position to navigate their circumstances and come to a place where they can be at peace.

Celia Del Pino's madness seems to originate from a combination of events and circumstances. Like both Antoinette and Mercedes, Celia is abandoned by her mother who sends her away to an aunt when she is only four. Katherine Payant sees her abandonment as the place where her psychological issues find their origin (166). However, Garcia does not go into great length discussing the events surrounding Celia's coming to live in Havana with her aunt, which leads me to believe that she is making a point that her mother is not the most significant cause of her madness. Crushed dreams create in her a restless spirit that brings about her initial psychotic

break. She falls in love with a married lawyer, Gustavo Sierra de Armas, and when he leaves her to return to Spain for his project, she spends eight months in bed, unable to function out of grief for her abandonment. Such behavior already hints at some level of already-existent underlying tendency toward depression, and becoming bedridden for the better part of a year for nothing other than the end of a relationship certainly is not a sign of normal coping with grief. She marries Jorge, who begins courting her even in her depression, only after a letter to Gustavo goes unanswered. Her husband is merely a second choice, and one may argue that she never loves him fully or with as much ardor as she had her first lover. Her obsession with Gustavo resembles Mercedes Santinio's obsession with her father in some ways. Like Mercedes, Celia seeks to find her own identity in her relationship with this male figure in her life. However, for Celia, both patriarchal and colonial systems are at play. Gustavo is from Spain, so not only is he a dominant male force in her life, but he is also a "colonizer" of her body, taking possession of it when he desires and leaving her when he has had enough.

Like Mercedes Santinio, Celia does have the added stressor of sisters-in-law who hate her and make her life miserable, especially while Jorge is away on business, further driving her into madness. Early in Celia and Jorge's marriage, they live with his family, and Celia finds herself alone with her in-laws when he must travel on business. Berta and Ofelia, her sisters-in-law, treat her poorly and wear down her sense of self worth. The passage outlining Celia's experience with her sisters-in-law is uncannily similar to Mercedes' torment by Buita; one passage stands out among the rest which demonstrates Celia's treatment:

One day, while the two of them went to buy embroidery threads, Celia decided to cook them a savory flank-steak stew. She set the dining-room table with the good linen and silverware, collected fruit from the tamarind tree, and squeezed and

strained a pitcherful of juice. Hopeful and nervous, she waited for their return. Ofelia got to the kitchen first. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ she said, opening and closing the lid of the pot like a cymbal. Berta Arango del Pino followed on her thick-ankled legs. She took two dishrags and carried the pot impassively through the living room, down the front steps and across the yard, then poured the steaming casserole into the gutter. (40-41)

Berta’s similarities with *Our House in the Last World*’s Buita are uncanny; from her overt and vocal face-to-face insults toward Celia to Berta’s previously-quoted physical action to belittle Celia, Berta displays the same hatred of her sister-in-law as Buita has for Mercedes. Berta is even described as having “thick-ankled legs,” which, while intended to be an insult, also connotes physical power, just like Buita, who was “ten feet tall” and much thicker and seemingly stronger than Mercedes. Again, Celia is abandoned by her husband, who is often away on business, and she is left with his family who hates her, isolates her, and does their very best to drive her to madness on their own; his family “left scraps . . . to eat, worse than what they fed the dogs in the street” (40). Further damaging effects of patriarchy can be seen by these toxic “in-law” relationships for both Celia and Mercedes. Such a culture creates an environment in which the female family members seek the approval and favor of their male relatives. For Buita and Berta, their brothers are the sources to whom they turn for their own identity; because of this, they view Mercedes and Celia (respectively) as competition for the approval of their male authority figure and must demonstrate to her that they are “alpha” females in their relationship with their brothers.

Her major psychotic break comes upon the birth of her first daughter, Lourdes. She decides that, if her child is a son, she will leave her husband and travel either to Grenada or

Spain, both possible locations of her long-lost lover. She will seek the freedom she feels she has lost and will try to reclaim the passion that died with Gustavo's disappearance. If her child is a daughter, though, she will stay as she "would not abandon a daughter to this life" (42). If her child had been a son, Celia knew that he would have opportunity and the favor of Jorge's family. However, if she has a daughter, the girl will be forced to grow up in a home with the same women who make Celia's own life hell. She will not only be at a disadvantage for being born a girl, but she would also have to grow up watching her mother be disrespected constantly by members of Jorge's family. Upon Lourdes' birth, Celia is incapable of bearing the grief of having her life circumstances cemented and the hope of freedom squelched. What Celia does not realize is that the freedom she imagines is a false reality; Gustavo used her as a lover while he was in Cuba, and when it was time for him to go, he abandoned Celia. He felt no loyalty to her, as she is a woman and thereby of lesser value. Her relationship with him is so idyllic because it never comes to fruition; had they become a committed couple, she would most likely have found herself in the same position as she is with the Del Pinos: a subordinate member in the hierarchic gender structure looking to the male authority figure in her life to provide her self-worth. As does Mercedes, Celia creates a fictional Gustavo with whom she exists both according to and outside of the constructs of the patriarchal system. She still believes that Gustavo will be her source of identity, but she also believes that he will be sensitive to her and treat her as an equal.

Her reaction to Lourdes shows her break with reality: "Celia talked about how the baby had no shadow, how the earth in its hunger had consumed it. She held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said 'I will not remember her name'" (42-43). She demonizes her child, saying that she is without shadow, suggesting that she is not a real person, but is instead some sort of evil parasite who consumed her body without proving its worth by being the son that

would absolve her of the responsibility of staying. Interestingly, while she tells herself that she will have to stay if she ends up with a daughter; once Lourdes is actually born, Celia is unable to follow through with that promise. Instead, she continues the cycle of abandonment and rejects Lourdes entirely. The mental image of her holding out her daughter by one leg is a disturbing display of her dissociation from the basic human emotion of love which customarily comes with a new baby.

Celia's psychotic outbreak provides Jorge with an opportunity to have her committed to a mental asylum. He seems to have good reason to do so, but Laura Halperin comments, "[I]t is not clear whether the reasons for placing her there lie in Celia's having actually gone mad, due to his mother and sister's maltreatment of her, or whether this is simply a guise for the punishment Jorge wreaks on his wife for having loved another man" (208-209). While a mental institution seems that it would be a place for her to begin healing, it ends up being filled with pills and electroshock therapy, and she must live with the question of whether Jorge committed her in an attempt to help her or whether he sought to punish her for her obsession with Gustavo. Where Antoinette has her prison in Thornfield, Celia's prison becomes a mental ward, where "they burn [her] skull with procedures" (51). Also like Antoinette, Celia sees her husband as the source of her situation, writing in one of her letters to Gustavo that "J. has betrayed me" (50). It is in this situation where her current state of mental illness collides with her broken relationship with her husband, where he has both betrayed her by putting her in the mental institution and abandoned her there.

It is worth exploring at this point the contribution of the oppression of a patriarchal society in the events which lead Celia to the mental institute. We already know that Celia was abandoned by her mother, and there is no mention of a male influence in her childhood, which

puts her at a disadvantage in being able to navigate gender relationships as she ages. She ends up in an affair with a married lawyer from Spain, who abandons her to return to his wife, leaving her in bed with grief for months. In a society in which male approval is a fundamental necessity, for her to have none, neither from a father or a lover, wreaks havoc on her sense of self-worth. She settles for a man who does not satisfy her in the same way that her previous lover did, and must live with his family who hates her. Part of their living with the Del Pinos may have been practical since Jorge travelled for work and Celia did not have much close family with whom she could continue to live, but the tradition of a patriarchal society is that the wife leaves her family and becomes part of her husband's family and, in this case, she is rejected and isolated further by the people whose approval she must seek. Halperin notices the effect of patriarchy in Celia's time in the asylum; she notes that "Celia's doctors 'used electricity' and 'fed her pills' to follow Jorge's instructions that they 'make her forget,' as opposed to treating her in this manner of their own accord and in line with their own medical prognoses. In this respect, their 'treatment' demonstrates a patriarchal complicity whereby the female patient's voice is utterly ignored and silenced" (210). Rather than making an attempt to heal her mind, her doctors simply try to do what Jorge asked them to do. Additionally, one must wonder what Jorge wants her to forget, exactly; does he only want her to forget Gustavo, or does he want her to forget his mistreatment of her by allowing his family to abuse her so? His request of the doctors to "make her forget" is a frightening ramification of a patriarchal system that pays no attention to the rights or wishes of the woman; he wishes to have her rendered a "clean slate" so that she will be happier/more pleasant/easier to live with/a better wife. In that light, it is disturbing to look at a situation where Jorge could have contributed to Celia's insanity, and then had the doctors at the asylum attempt to render her an amnesiac so that she would forget the mistreatment and he would have a new

beginning to create in her the kind of woman he would want her to be. One must also notice the description of the asylum; it is reminiscent of both Antoinette's convent and Thornfield; Jorge puts Celia in a prison with "no bougainvillea. No heliconia. No flowering cactus burning myths in the desert" (51), a prison, like Rhys's Thornfield, without any connection to the natural world, a nature of "right angles" (51), suggesting rigidity, hallways, buildings, and sharp corners instead of sunlight, openness, nature, and the natural flowing of water. Notice here that specific mention is made of the lack of flowers in and around the asylum. Their absence symbolizes Celia's isolation from her femininity and from her passion.

Completing the circumstances that shake her mentally is a string of losses that she experiences later in her life. First, her husband dies after spending four years in America seeking treatment for stomach cancer. He leaves her contemplating this separation; because he travelled so much with his work, "separation [was] familiar, too familiar, but [she] is uncertain she can reconcile it with permanence" (6). Over the last years, Celia has managed to come to love Jorge, although not the same way she loved Gustavo. While he was not a perfect husband, he is the man to whom she has clung to for stability (like Mercedes to Alejo), so his death removes an anchoring force in her life.

After that, her daughter Felicia dies, and then her son Javier loses a battle with cancer as well. She is thrice abandoned by death. She enjoys a weeklong visit from her daughter Lourdes and her granddaughter, Pilar, which she believes will be the start of a close face-to-face relationship with the granddaughter with whom she has always been so close spiritually, speaking telepathically to one another across the sea and in dreams for years. She hopes that Pilar would choose to stay with her so that they can enjoy their connection in person, but Pilar comes to understand the difficulty of life in Cuba during her visit there and, before leaving, Pilar

and Lourdes help Felicia's son Ivanito escape to America. Celia does not know that Pilar has betrayed her, which is for the best as it leaves her love for Pilar untainted. In the end, however, she loses all three of them when they return to the U.S. Between 1972, when Jorge dies, and 1980, when she is left behind in Cuba by Lourdes, Pilar, and Ivanito, she is abandoned five times over.

Celia employs three coping mechanisms to navigate her circumstances: a sensual obsession with el Líder and his Revolution, a deep connection to water and the ocean, and finally, similar to Antoinette, suicide. Each of these three mechanisms is a symptom of her silent, passive madness that continues long after her psychotic break at Lourdes' birth. Her obsession with and desire to please el Líder is irrational at best, but more likely a delusional connection to someone to keep her feelings of abandonment at bay. One cannot explore her obsession with Castro without doing so in light of her obsession with Gustavo. Clearly, Celia has a history of obsession with powerful men. Additionally, both Gustavo and El Líder represent conquering forces; Gustavo was from Spain, and he was in a position of power over because he had "conquered" her heart. In that way, her pining away for him after he leaves symbolizes the colonized people's affection to the colonizer in spite of being made subordinate. When her Spanish Conquistador fails to return, she transfers this obsession onto Castro, who, while coming from the opposite political/philosophical position, is still a conqueror. As the "conquered" (both as a woman and as a member of a communist society), Celia chooses Castro to be the object of her affection/obsession.

Although her family has left her behind, whether in death or leaving the country, el Líder and his effect on Cuba remains the same; she has lost the stability of her husband and children, so he now becomes her source of stability. Her devotion to him grounds her and ties her to her

country and to her community. She spends nights sitting on the beach all night, surveying the ocean for American military coming for attack. Sitting alone in the dark, watching nothing more than a few fishing boats in the water creates a feeling of loneliness and isolation, and yet she dresses in her finest, wearing a dress, high-heels, red lipstick, and a mole that she has artificially darkened with her eyebrow pencil (4), just in case she was able to prevent a major military action and “would be feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Líder himself on a red velvet divan” (3). Her lonely midnight moments on the beach lead her to an indulgent fantasy of making a difference on a grand scale, eventually landing her in El Líder’s bed. Her obsession leaves her, as a middle-aged woman, working in the cane fields, presiding over the community court, and spending nights sitting on the beach, scanning the horizon for her opportunity to bring reality to her irrational fantasies of being seduced by a man whom she will never even meet. Celia is simply transferring her obsession with Gustavo to her obsession with Castro; he becomes her male authority figure, her father figure, and she begins patterning her life after his wishes, seeking his approval even though she has never met him. In her case at least, the patriarchal system which created her devotion also inspired a strong sense of nationalism in her effort to gain Castro’s approval. Castro benefits twice from that patriarchal structure of Cuba; not only does he have thousands of women vying for his attention in a sexual way, but he also has an entire “army” of women willing to do whatever he needs for the sake of the country so that they may gain the approval of the “father” of Cuba.

That she spends her nights fantasizing on the beach seems appropriate for Celia, as she is so close to her beloved water, to which she is inextricably connected as a healing force, a haven, and ultimately her final place of rest. I believe that her connection to the natural world through water is what allows her to—despite her death by suicide—triumph over her madness. The

importance of water to Celia is made absolutely clear immediately at the beginning of the novel. First, it is the way that she finds out that Jorge has died, because of his ghostly visit to her; he comes “walking on water,” and “he stops at the ocean’s edge” (5), a “huge, buoyant man on the ocean” (6). He appears to her, not in the water, as though he was part of her healing ocean, but on top of the water, as he was in life, with her, but not within her. Her method of dealing with her grief is to put herself in a position within the ocean:

She wades deeper into the ocean. It pulls on her housedress like weights on her hem. Her hands float on the surface of the sea, still clutching her shoes, as if they could lead her to a new place . . . The water laps at her throat. She arches her spine until she floats on her back, straining to hear the notes of the Alhambra at midnight...She stretches her legs but she cannot touch the sandy bottom. Her arms are heavy, sodden as porous wood after a storm. She has lost her shoes. A sudden wave engulfs her, and for a moment, Celia is tempted to relax and drop.
(7-8)

Interestingly, she carries her shoes into the ocean, as if, were she to choose to drop into the water and die, they would provide her protection for her journey into the afterlife or into the next world after this, reminiscent of ancient cultures which buried their dead with provisions for their journey. This time, though, the water assuages her grief and she chooses to return to shore, although by this time, she has lost the shoes that carried her to this point and would carry her home. She chooses life, but in doing so loses the article of clothing that serve as her shield against the earth, a place of loss and abandonment and isolation. She returns to the earth from the water, but she does so without protection for her feet, almost as though she was ready to sink into the water and let go.

Her final passage into the water begins similarly to the first; she approaches the ocean, but this time, “Celia removes her leather pumps” (243) and does not take them with her. The finality of this trip is apparent immediately:

Celia steps into the ocean and imagines she’s a soldier on a mission—for the moon, or the palms, or El Líder. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, She breathes through her wounds . . . Celia reaches up to her left earlobe and releases her drop pearl earring into the sea. She feels its absence between her thumb and forefinger. Then she unfastens the tiny clasp in her right ear and surrenders the other pearl. Celia closes her eyes and imagines it drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas, imagines its slow extinguishing. (243-244)

This time, the water does not merely lap at her throat, but submerges it and her nose as well (covering both orifices that allow her to take in air to live). Also of note, this time, she removes her earrings, earrings that she’d only removed nine times since Gustavo gave them to her. This action is symbolic; once she loses her husband and all of her children, and long after she stopped writing her never-sent letters to Gustavo, she is finally ready to let him go. Gustavo has been her deepest and longest-standing connection to her past, toward her fantasized life. Her ability to let him go, symbolized by her freeing herself of his earrings, demonstrates her readiness to leave the world.

It may seem that, in her suicide, her madness has won and has defeated her, just as it defeated Antoinette and Mercedes, but such a thought would be somewhat short-sighted. While she has lived a life of hardship and sadness, she has also managed to live a life of passion,

passion for Gustavo, and—in a way—for Jorge, whom she eventually came to love. Regardless of her motivation, she developed a passion for the Revolution and for El Líder. She survived her mental breakdown and cruel treatment in the asylum. She survived cancer. Although she committed suicide and as such, surrendered to the melancholic madness brought by abandonment and loss that tormented her mind, she ended her life on her own terms. She chose the time and place, and she chose the method, and she chose to join the vast ocean, to become a part of the entire earth.

Felicia del Pino, Celia's second daughter, is the only woman in this study who seems to have both circumstances and physiological issues at play which contribute to her madness; in addition to the abuse she suffers at the hand of her husband which, similar to the aforementioned three women, drives her to a psychological break, Felicia is also infected with syphilis by her husband, and the disease goes untreated throughout the novel even to her death. Her madness is foreshadowed from birth; her mother names her after a friend from her time in the asylum who killed her husband by setting him on fire and was "unrepentant" (51). One must question Celia's reason for choosing that particular namesake; it seems as though she is almost "cursing" Felicia to a future of madness. However, Celia has also returned from her own experience in the asylum, an experience which she blames on Jorge; in light of that, it also seems plausible that Celia chose the name of a woman who asserted herself over her husband and who was not afraid of the consequences of acting against him. Celia's rebellion at this point was limited to playing Debussy on the piano while Jorge was away (Debussy was determined to be off-limits to her because of the passion his music inspires). Perhaps selecting "Felicia" to be her daughter's name is, in fact, an attempt to destine her to be strong and unafraid to be assertive.

Felicia's relationship with Hugo, her first husband and the father of her children, is the marriage which most resembles the abusive relationship suffered by both Mercedes and Antoinette. Their relationship begins in violence with Hugo's rough behavior during their first sexual encounter in which he "bit Felicia's breasts and left purplish ands of bruises on her upper thighs" and referred to her as his "bitch" (80). He seems to marry her solely because she is pregnant, and when she offers to engage in their usual sexual play of her tying him up on their first night as husband and wife, he "pressed his fist under Felicia's chin until he choked off her breath, until she could see the walls of the living room behind her" (81) and subsequently threatened to kill her. After living under this type of abusive relationship for longer than she can bear, Felicia makes the decision to murder Hugo. Garcia leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not Felicia was overcome by madness when she decides to kill Hugo, although she makes the statement that the ceasing of her nausea "gave her a clarity she could not ignore" (82). Felicia was pregnant with Ivanito at the time and suffered greatly from morning sickness. Additionally, Garcia notes that Felicia's "sex, too, was infected with syphilis and the diseases Hugo brought back from Morocco and other women" (82). In essence, she was living with her own body working against her at this point, both with the nausea from pregnancy and sickness from the STDs, both things with which she has been "infected" by Hugo. For her nausea to clear spontaneously and rapidly like that unclouds her mind which, until this point, has been overcome by physical symptoms of her infections at the hand of her husband seems almost like divine intervention and Felicia takes advantage of that clarity. She decides to kill Hugo just as Celia's friend Felicia does, by setting him on fire.

In her doctoral dissertation, Laura Halperin compares the passage in *Dreaming in Cuban* where Felicia burns Hugo to Bertha's burning of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* to point out that these

passages “[highlight] just now much Felicia, like Bertha, is marked by her madness” (147). I agree that their connection to fire and use of fire to burn their husbands is an important connection. However, I think that comparisons can be made both to Bertha and Antoinette, and that the comparisons to Antoinette are probably more consistent in view of discussion of their madness in terms of the oppression of a patriarchal society. Like Bertha, Felicia intentionally sets fire to her husband as an act of rebellion or revenge. Antoinette, as described by Rhys, is caught in a delusion and is desperately attempting to find a way to escape Thornfield and to return to Coulibri. Felicia’s only “mark of madness” to this point has been her namesake; otherwise, she is a woman in a male-dominated society who has been abused and infected by her husband, which is far more in keeping with Antoinette’s position. Antoinette is a victim of a husband who does not love her, fears her, and cheats on her; it is these events that contribute to her madness. *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha is not given any of this dimension; she is “marked by her madness” because she has no other role in the novel than that of being the madwoman; she is not granted the agency to tell her own story and, as such, the “mark of madness” for her is the only dimension that she is given in the first place. Nonetheless, a comparison can be drawn between Felicia and Bertha/Antoinette in that they use fire as a method of dealing with an undesirable situation.

April Shemak suggests that Felicia’s burning Hugo may have been intended to be “an attempted purification of Hugo’s diseased body—the body that contaminates her” (9). Halperin also notes that “fire liberates Felicia and Bertha from patriarchal oppression, even if such liberation is as transient as the fire itself” (147). The transience of liberation for Bertha is clear; she dies in the fire, so any liberation she experiences is short-lived. It is interesting, though, that she points out that Felicia’s liberation is transient as well. The ideal result would be that the fire that kills Hugo will be the fire that, at least symbolically, heals Felicia. Instead, she merely

disfigures him, and her decision backfires by alienating her daughters from her and driving them to seek out and develop a relationship with their disfigured father. Her liberation is short-lived; not only does the fire not heal her physically, it does not fulfill her desire, which was to remove Hugo and his influence on her life. His influence will now live on through his daughters' relationship with him and how that will taint their view of her. Additionally, this initial act of madness is only the beginning of a series of further incidents which demonstrate Felicia's increasing madness.

Thus, Felicia becomes prisoner to her own mind, full of delusions and rash psychotic decisions. She ignores her daughters and focuses solely on her son, Ivanito, on whom she showers affection and attention, eventually to the point of his being removed from his life for her nearly-inappropriate love for him. In one of her delusions, she forces Ivanito to eat nothing but coconuts for months, and then cooks a beautiful chicken meal and laces it with poison, trying to kill them both. Such an action seems to be both self-destructive (an obvious suicide attempt) and perhaps an attempt to hurt both Hugo and her own mother, by taking away someone precious to them both. Another attempt to hurt Hugo by killing his only male heir seems like a logical progression in some ways; she was unable to kill him, but she will be able to hurt him in a way from which he could never recover. Although Celia has never been as cold to her as she was to Lourdes, Celia certainly has not been an attentive mother, so for Felicia to take such an action would "punish" Celia for her own abandonment and also take away Ivanito, whom Celia loves dearly.

Felicia, too, has connections with nature which follow her throughout her descent into madness; her psychosis is described by Garcia as manifested by both sound and color:

Felicia del Pino doesn't know what brings on her delusions. She knows only that suddenly she can hear things very vividly. The scratching of a beetle on the porch. The shifting of the floorboards in the night. She can hear everything in this world and others, every sneeze and creak and breath in the heavens or the harbor or the gardenia tree down the block. They call to her all at once, grasping here and there for parts of her, hatching blue flames in her brain . . . The colors, too, escape their objects. The red floats above the carnations on her windowsill. The blues rise from the chipped tiles in the kitchen. Even the greens, her favorite shades of greens, flee the trees and assault her with luminosity. (75)

Many of her delusions involve being hyper-aware of nature, hearing the beetle scratch and the creak of the gardenia tree around the block. Such auditory and visual hallucinations suggest a physical illness with mental symptoms, something along the lines of schizophrenia or the lingering mental damage from a continued case of syphilis. While it does seem that her troubled marriage with Hugo and subsequent murder attempt may have been the triggering event for her madness, the depth and severity of her symptoms suggest that something physiological, rather than just psychological, may be in play. It is interesting to note that the narrator furthers the connection with Felicia and fire by describing the sounds as creating fire in her brain. Such an image suggests that, to extinguish the fire inside her head, she must burn Hugo's head from the outside in. While this would assuredly only be what Halperin would call a "transient liberation," it is interesting to note that her murder attempt on Hugo is not successful and, perhaps not so coincidentally, the fire in her brain cannot be stopped.

Felicia's second marriage ends in fire as well when her husband Ernesto is killed in a grease fire while on the job before they are even able to move in together. Felicia develops a new

manifestation of her mental illness at this point: paranoia. The “white light illuminating her brain” (150) tells her that El Líder is responsible for Ernesto’s death, and she begins to spiral into a delusion that other people are in on the murder, “[watching] her bleary-eyed from behind their square black glasses, signaling to each other with coughs and claps,” and she blames the light in her head on these people, saying that “they refract it through their glasses so she cannot see, so she cannot identify the guilty ones” (150). She finally settles on Graciela Morales whom she burns by mixing lye and her menstrual blood and telling Graciela that she is using a new hair product. As Graciela is screaming, “Felicia imagines the mixture melting through Graciela’s frail scalp, penetrating the roots and bones of her skull until it eats her vicious brain like acid” (151). Felicia’s paranoia reaches a dangerous fever pitch, causing her to escalate her behavior from hurting someone who has directly hurt her to hurting someone who she irrationally suspects hurt her husband. Her violence is no longer a defensive act, but has progressed to assaulting someone who has not directly acted against her.

Felicia’s attack on Graciela is immediately followed by a long mental blackout and she comes to her senses eight months later, not knowing her name and finding herself married to a big burly man named Otto, who promises to take her to America and, specifically, Minnesota, quite the opposite of sunny, tropical Cuba surrounded by ocean. Felicia eventually begins to remember who she is and she eventually ends up killing Otto in an amusement park. While Felicia’s description of the event suggests that she merely enticed him to stand in the roller coaster car so that she can perform oral sex on him and then allowed him to fall as the roller coaster sped down a hill, Herminia Delgado’s retelling of the story indicates that Felicia confesses to pushing him, “[watching] him die on a bed of high-voltage wires” (185-186). Felicia has lost another spouse via fire, this time, in a much more detached and cold way. She burned

Hugo as an act of revenge for his infecting her and escapes from his abuse. She pushes Otto onto the electrical wires seemingly for no reason; the reader is not given any inkling that he has abused her or that he does not love her, and the entire section of the novel describing her time spend with him sounds like a hazy dream.

Amazingly, when Felicia returns home from her time with Otto, this period of madness ceases as she returns to her friend Herminia, whom she had begged to save her when they were children, and she begins to dedicate the remainder of her life to the practice of *Santería*, a nature-based Afrocuban religion similar to Voodoo or Obeah. Through this connection to *santería*, Felicia begins the process of healing—mentally, because the syphilis has reached a point where she cannot be cured and, quite honestly, appears to have become terminal. While Celia would probably disagree that Felicia's choice is evidence of her mental healing—Celia is both wary and afraid of *santería*—it is hard even for her to deny that the religion and communion with other followers provides Felicia with a sense of grounding and stability and produces a sense of calm that Felicia may never have experienced in her life. It is this calm that carries her through the last days of her life.

Shortly after the ceremony that initiates Felicia as a *santera*, her health begins to decline rapidly. Herminia describes her appearance:

Her eyes dried out like an old woman's and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow's, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face . . . [Her] eyesight dimmed until she could perceive only shadows, and the right side of her head swelled with mushy lumps. (189)

Notice here the contrast with the previous quoted passage where her hallucinations caused everything to be made brighter, louder, and more present. The above description of Felicia leaves her with dulled senses. As her mind becomes more peaceful, her outer senses become diminished, whereas in her lunacy, her senses were heightened and more aware of her vivid surroundings. When Felicia is at the height of her madness is also when she is most sexual; her relationships with Ernesto and Otto are both passionate, so it seems that her madness makes her keenly aware of her surroundings and her sexuality. For Felicia, to break free of the patriarchal system is to lose her connection with her femininity and with her natural surroundings. Felicia's appearance in the passage above does not resemble at all earlier descriptions of her as being beautiful. In fact, the only reference above to her gender is in terms of her appearing like an old woman; her femininity is dulled just as her physical senses are.

The nature of her illness is not specified, whether it is cancer, the syphilis finally becoming fatal, or something of a more supernatural nature. There is at least a subtle suggestion of the latter, as Celia watches while Felicia's physical afflictions are healed by the other *santeras* as she is being prepared for burial. This one and only visible manifestation of the power of *santería* perhaps hints that the spirits wished to permanently relieve Felicia from the voices in her head. Whether or not this is the case, she died at peace. This clarity of mind and quietness of soul in her final days makes her death a victory over the madness which afflicted her for most of her adult life. Interestingly, April Shemak suggests that her postmortem healing is evidence of her failure to thrive on the earth; she says, "that her outward healing occurs only after her death suggests that she was not able to find a healthy social space in which to exist" (12). In this statement, Shemak presents Felicia's healing as a symbol of failure, not as a triumph over a tormented life as a prisoner to one's own madness. I agree, but I do believe that she finds a

healthy social space among the *santeras*. Unfortunately, that environment came too late in her life when her physical illnesses had already wrought too much havoc on her body. Throughout the novel, we see a Felicia who appears beautiful and healthy, even looking strong and tanned during her mental blackout period with Otto. In all of her beauty, she is tormented by thoughts, voices, sounds, and colors and is unable to navigate reality on her own. It is not until she finds Herminia again, her childhood friend who “saves” her with an unconventional lifestyle that, while scary to some, gives Felicia a role as part of something bigger than herself. Her newfound sense of comfort and clarity begin to calm her mind and soul, and although her health deteriorates, the likely result of a disease she already contracted long ago, whether it be Hugo’s syphilis or inheriting Celia’s cancer, her thoughts are clear and coherent and she dies in peace. To me, the postmortem healing of her body is the point at which her body and mind finally meet. Initially, her mind is broken and her body looks well; after she becomes a *santera*, her mind is healed but her body fails. Her restoration at the hands of her fellow *santeras* while her body is being prepared for burial demonstrates the reconciliation of Felicia’s mind and body, now whole and at peace.

CONCLUSION: THE LASTING EFFECTS OF PATRIARCHY IN CARIBBEAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

The patriarchal system of Caribbean culture is far-reaching and has long-lasting effects. These three novels seem to indicate that it is not something that can be overcome, but is something that must either be accepted without question or thought, or something that must be navigated through carefully. Acts of rebellion are futile and most often require some sort of self-harm as is made evident in these three novels. To truly escape the oppression of the patriarchal system requires removal from it, and madness seems to be both a result of oppression and a method of escaping the same.

Felicia Del Pino's story indicates that a sense of community can be helpful in navigating and coping with systems of female oppression. Her mental healing comes once she has withdrawn from regular society into a closed community of *santeras*, which allows her to avoid contact with men altogether. Her syphilis has made her "infected" by male society, and I imagine that such types of contamination were (and may still be) relatively common in cultures that are so heavily patriarchal. As such, femininity itself seems to be an infection, placing women in a position where they can be contaminated by men and then rejected by men for being contaminated. Felicia's mental healing comes when she withdraws from society and loses most of her feminine attributes such as her facial structure, hair, deep eyes, and fingernails. *Dreaming in Cuban* seems to suggest that removal from society is the only way to combat systems of oppression.

This lack of community seems to be a large part of what destroys the other three women. Both Celia Del Pino and Mercedes Santinio exist not only within the system of patriarchy, but also exist within a hostile family environment. Usually, women within a family band together to

create their own sense of identity, but when Mercedes and Celia enter their husbands' families, they are not accepted and, in fact, are further damaged by their female in-laws' rejection and ridicule. The same patriarchal structure which creates in women a sense of subordination also apparently creates an intense jealousy over competition for their male relatives, which does nothing but cause hostility between women and further sets back any attempt to band together to navigate through society. What these novels show, then, is that a patriarchal culture not only oppresses women directly, but it also creates a system in which women work against each other to maximize the positive attention they can potentially gain from the men in their lives.

Particularly in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we can see the interweaving of systems of colonialism and patriarchy which make community quite difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Antoinette is rejected by both sub-groups on her island, and although she identifies more with the Black people in her life, she is unable to join that community because she still has the appearance and legacy of the colonial oppressors. Her rejection by both the Black and White communities on the island isolates her from a sense of camaraderie with other women which would help her cope with her circumstances as a woman. Rhys shows that systems of oppression in the Caribbean are particularly complex because of the effects of both patriarchy and colonialism, but she also presents both of these structures as being impossible to overcome.

Each novel also shows how a connection with nature and a sense of place can be a grounding and healing force for women, and that being exiled from it damages their sense of self and brings about madness. Cuba and Dominica are described in terms of their lush environment and particularly in their abundance of flowers, which associates them with passion, creativity, and femininity. These women gain some sense of agency through their connection with these vibrant bright places. Particularly in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Our House in the Last World*, the

island environments are contrasted with Western (Anglo) environments which are presented as dark, dank, and miserable. Not only does forced exile from their home environments demonstrate the male abuse of patriarchal power, but it also shows how forced Westernization is a mitigating factor in the destruction of female identity.

Dreaming in Cuban, in particular, shows some hope for the female ability to develop a sense of identity outside of controlling male forces. Much of the novel surrounds Celia's granddaughter Pilar, who was not discussed in this thesis in detail, but who through her experience during her visit to Cuba comes to see the oppressive nature of its environment. Throughout the novel, Pilar romanticizes Cuba, much to her mother, Lourdes' dismay. However, once she arrives and sees the conditions under which people live because of Castro's rule, she comes to understand that Cuba cannot be the location in which she grounds herself. Conversely, Garcia could be inadvertently suggesting that the only way to escape the oppression of systems of colonialism and patriarchy in Cuba is literally to escape the country itself. Her successful characters end up in the U.S., while Celia and Felicia, who remain in Cuba, both die.

It seems that, in all three of these novels, the only way to escape systems of colonial and male oppression is either to escape the island of one's own agency (like Lourdes and Pilar), or to escape through death. There is hope in that two of these women, Celia and Felicia Del Pino, are able to die after being healed from their madness. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Our House in the Last World* suggest that patriarchal structures cannot be overcome and women will either cope with it by allowing their identities to be built by the male authority in their lives, or they will succumb to it, going mad in the process and eventually destroying themselves.

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